AMERICAN LOVE

By

Jenese Hornsby

Honors Essay

Department of English

University of North Carolina

2014

Approved:

_____

CONTENTS

TOTAL WORD COUNT: 24,073

Halfway Crooks

Ma once said that if the palms of your hands itched, it was like fate saying you were about to fall onto some cash. I was known to scratch the lines off mine, so of course Gran had to talk. “It’s that hot thief’s blood same as his Pa,” she’d hiss, like she always knew I’d steal. She thought crime flowed through kin like good hair and stroke, but really it was more than that. I wasn’t bound for trouble any more than any other kid. That’s just the way being young was. You’re riding around with the squad, and next thing you know, shit just happens. Someone’s got half a gram of bud in their pocket, or you’re in the backyard of some old woman itching to call the police. I was too smooth for that stuff though. I knew I could cop anything under twenty-five dollars without being caught, so if you came at me asking for something like ten bags of peanut M&Ms, I’d have you

covered, but Gran didn't appreciate things like that. She didn't understand the finesse that went into slipping five packs of gum up your sleeve, or the rush of walking into a dressing room and spinning those thick rubber bands found on broccoli around the security tab of a pair of jeans before it snapped off and all you had to do was slip them on under your sweat pants and walk out.

Ma, Gran, and I lived on the bougie side of Decatur in a squat brick number with just enough water pressure to flush the toilet without holding the nob down. Gran had always been proud of that house, with its chain-link fence going around the front yard and tacky burgundy carpet that turned the bottom of your socks pink. That was back before they started flipping things, putting in Barnes & Nobles and cutting sidewalks into the asphalt to bring all the white people back. Gran had grown up in the country. "The country" meaning anything outside of metro Atlanta, and although that house really was a first class roach motel, it was better than the burglar barred shacks that other folks lived in, so she always had the church ladies over for Bible study, leaving the house smelling like Motion's Hair Conditioner and Macy's perfume samples. She would call me out of my room as an example of what was wrong with "young men these days," all because I was trying to get some dreads going. I had a scheme to have mad hunnies by my junior-senior year, but Gran was always trying to kill my plans.

She'd be like, "Darius, come on out here and say hello to Miss Pearl. You know her grandbaby goes to school with you. You know Tiffany?" And I did know Tiffany. She was fine as hell with these real light eyes that'd make you think she was mixed, but she was too wild, always fighting with other females for talking about her, popping off during lunch, and having the whole cafeteria up out of their seats. She'd dated my boy

Malik for a while, and we tried to come correct and tell him that his girl was run through, but he wouldn't believe us till he caught her giving some nigga on the basketball team head in the locker room.

But I wouldn't share that information with Miss Pearl. She probably heard things about Tiffany anyway, knowing the way church ladies liked to talk. I'd step out of my room, take out my headphones, and say hey to the ladies of First Communion Baptist. I'd have to listen to them suck their teeth at me, and Gran would start up.

"I've been telling this boy that if he don't cut that hair," Gran said shaking her finger in that old lady way.

"Now, if he'd been a little girl, you know it'd be just the reverse," said one of the ladies. "You'd be about to raise hell over a girl cutting hair like that."

Gran placed her hands on her hips. "If I'd wanted it long he's shave bald, and if I'd wanted it as is right for a young man, he'd claim Sampson just to spite me. Don't make no difference."

I backed out of the living room, away from their yapping. No matter what I did, Gran would call me out. Really, it made no difference.

That was the summer Malik got his older brother's ride, and most day's he'd be cool enough to scoop everyone up. He'd always pull into the driveway with his music on blast, and Gran would fling open the screen door yelling at Malik to "turn that mess down."

"Are you just going to keep on letting him run wild like that?" Gran would ask Ma every time I got ready to leave the house. I could have just gone out to check the

mail, and she'd still peak out the window at me, half expecting me to be lead back to the door by some cop.

We usually just chilled at the park, watching pick-up basketball games where the trash talking got so foul you knew somebody was about to be jumped on their way home if they didn't shut-up. None of us played though. It was just the spot to hang. After the games, we'd make stops. We'd walk into a gas station or grocery store, and I could get anyone anything they wanted. There were just aisles and aisles of stuff. Aisles and aisles of things that had price tags that didn't matter.

All of us wanted to be known for something. A tag line that would make us stand out from everyone else, and I sure as hell didn't want to be known as the one who had Bible study at his house every Wednesday or the one with the crazy grandmamma asking the pastor to baptize me every Sunday as if I were some devil child in need of holy water. I never hurt anybody, and occasionally when we'd have to let somebody's young-as-hell kid brother or sister tag along, we'd hit up the dollar store and I'd come out of that place with so many coloring books and plastic dinosaur toys that those kids thought Christmas came early. Occasionally, Malik would start running at the mouth.

"Now you know there's no such thing as a halfway crook, right?" Malik said one day at the usual Wal-Mart.

We were in electronics eyeing these real big, Grand Master Flash style headphones that were practically asking to be snagged. They were worth almost a hundred dollars and usually kept under lock and key, but this pair was left in plain sight on top of the customer service counter like someone forgot to put them away.

"True, but I'm no crook," I said. I was into small things, but nothing big. Nothing real.

"Shoplifting's a rich white girl crime, when you gonna step it up?" he said.

I didn't want him to think I was a punk, so I did it. The headphones were really just as easy as anything else. I cut the plastic and grabbed, but I still wasn't down for anything really criminal. I let Malik walk out with them looped around his neck, and I felt nervous, more nervous than I'd ever felt during any other steal, but we did it.

From then on, we felt comfortable pushing the boundaries of the twenty-five dollar rule. We knew this one nigga who worked at Footlocker and would let us try on all the shoes we wanted. We'd start the day in flip flops and end up in Jordans. I'd get the necessary trade-ins at Wal-Mart by slipping on a pair of sneakers that looked like they were made of cardboard and pool-noodle foam, put my flip flops in the empty shoe box, and leave. Then, we'd go on over to the mall, ask our man inside to let us try on a pair no one would miss. We'd fill the Footlocker boxes with our Wal-Mart knockoffs, and we'd walk out of there with so much ease, it made you wonder why anyone paid for anything ever. I hid the shoes in a hole I dug out of the bottom of my box spring, hoping Ma, and especially Gran, never found them, but Gran was always out to get me. I'd come home and find her snooping around my room, but I didn't have the kind of authority to tell her to get out, so I'd just turn my music on and see if she tried to stay. My room was too small for two people to even breathe in there without making someone feel uncomfortable. She'd make a loud humph sound at me, before shuffling out in her grey house shoes and dingy robe.

Gran still didn't know I stole, but I was always breaking shit on accident. I was into taking stuff apart then trying to put it back normal. TV remotes, radios, toy cars, whatever happened to be around, and I always started up at night, like I needed to get a good hour or two of work in before shutting everything down. Gran had these copper music boxes that I'd been working on, ancient looking things that you'd expect to find at the bottom of the ocean, but that'd really just been collected from antique shops and yard sales. She kept them in a frosted glass china cabinet that took up half the kitchen, and I was an expert at sneaking one off to my room, breaking it down, and then fixing it like new before anyone caught on.

There was this one shaped like a mini-church organ that I just couldn't fix, and Gran got so mad at me, you'd have thought she caught me smoking reefer.

"I've always said you'd steal like him too!" she yelled, slamming the unfixable music box onto the kitchen table. Every mistake I made was a sign of something bigger. She was always bringing up this father that I didn't know, this old broke nigga who'd knocked up my Ma and stole whatever cash Gran had saved up after years at the post office. Shit like that, I couldn't stand. The occasional comment in the middle of dinner. *Close your mouth. You chew like him.*

I paced around the kitchen in front of her, shuffling like a boxer before a fight. I did steal, but I wasn't like that. There were no faces to the things I took. Every kid has some parent they don't want to be like, and I didn't want to be like the one I didn't know. You hear stories about what your parents are like before they meet each other. My Ma was one of those women who almost had a future. We even had a copy of *War and Peace*

sitting on the living room table. Shit that made people's eyes get big when they came over.

"I was going to fix it back!" I said.

Gram shuffled into my bedroom, cursing. I heard crashing sounds. Drawers being pulled out and overturned. I hoped she'd throw her back out.

I didn't understand the crime of taking a music box from the very house I lived in. Gran was yelling at me and messing up all of my stuff, and it wasn't fair because I couldn't say anything back. I wasn't that stupid, but something inside of me was burning up. I had that fire. Like they say in the videos, "he got dat fire" and it's some skinny shirtless nigga in the ghetto, grinning and trigger happy with an AK strapped to his bike's handlebars. I was so angry. I had so much fire.

I ran outside slamming the door behind me, and took off towards the slice of woods next door so I could breathe in the mold leaf smell and be calm. Out back the kudzu was choking everything to death. I thought of why Gran had so much hate for me. Could be I was proof her kid had done wrong. she and I hadn't always been so rough though. It was like as soon as I grew armpit hair, she couldn't stand me.

Gran wasn't about to come running into the woods, so I just sat around till sunset ripping leaves from the ground, tearing them up, and throwing them into the air like confetti. I knew that if I stayed in that house any longer, one of us was going to end up hurt. If I could, I would have slept in that kudzu. I would've lay down and waited for the thin vines to coil around my ribcage and stop my heart from flinging itself against my chest. I was so angry at her. Layers upon layers of anger that all stemmed from that man I didn't know. When it got dark, I started heading back with the fear that Ma would be

home ready to whoop me for running off. I was sixteen, but I still had that leather belt phobia. I could feel my ass aching as I opened the door.

Inside, Ma was setting the table like we were having company, like it was something we did on the regular when I'd really never seen her triangle fold a napkin in my life. She still had her work scrubs on with her assistant nurse ID badge and everything.

"Hey," I said expecting her to either snap at me or give me the silent treatment. I assumed Gran was in her room smoking her lungs black, and I knew Ma had to have heard about our fight.

"I just put the meatloaf in. I'm gonna need you to watch it while I change. We're having someone over for dinner. He works at the hospital, and I don't need you acting crazy." She gave me this look like the future of my ass depended on that dinner.

I turned on the oven light and flicked on the TV. I checked on Gram's damage to my room. It was in post-hurricane status, but she didn't have the strength to lift the mattress, so my stash was safe.

Around seven thirty there was a knock on the door, and Ma ran out of her room to open it. She had on this red silk dress that made her look like she should be in China, and she'd brushed her hair in a bun so tight that I couldn't help but think that she was trying to pull back the skin so her wrinkles wouldn't show. She gave me the same watch-your-ass-look before opening the door.

I never expected much when Ma brought somebody over. She had a habit for falling for the niggas that no one else would want. Though herself some sort of saint for taking them in, for showing them love. I assumed it was a way of keeping her guard up,

falling for men she swore would never leave her. She knew that she was the absolute best they would ever do. She was like some precious jewel and they were barefoot miners, out of their minds lucky to have found her at all. But that was Ma's problem. That was the problem with being nice to people. It raised them. It lifted them to a whole other level. She puffed them up, these jokers that she insisted on saving, giving them gas money on their way out the house, or fixing plates for them on Thanksgivings that they were too busy to show up for. Those men would mistake her affection for normal, for ordinary. They'd say things like "now *you* are what a *real* woman looks like," they'd buy me shit and call me "son," then they'd dump her, but not even to her face. Just a phone call they wouldn't pick up.

This new man wore a Mr. Roger's type sweater and had the hunched back of a janitor. He shook my hand, and ate Ma's meatloaf without looking at me. Gran had been smart enough to take her dinner into her room. If there was anyone she hated more than me, it was the men Ma brought home. This man's name was Jackson. Jackson Thomas from Greenville, South Carolina. Been in Georgia for 5 years. Managed food preparation down at the hospital. Had half of one canine tooth missing after chipping it on a frozen Snicker's bar.

Jackson would date my Ma that whole summer, and he'd have dinner at our house so often, that I'd stay out so as not to catch him there. I'd been working on a plan to get out, I knew Malik's older brother had a spot in Atlanta and he'd let me crash if I could put up rent. I'd never have to pay for food and the small things that I could just steal, but coming up with the rent money would be hard.

Every day Malik and I rode through town looking for ways to make money. He wasn't cool with his moms and pops either, but he also wasn't on my level. Every time I came home, Gran would run through my room messing everything up. I'd see my clothes and all my stuff on the floor, punch a hole in my bedroom wall, and rearrange the furniture so no one would notice. If Malik's family was as bad as mine, we didn't talk about it. Some things were just understood. If I happened to be roaming the streets like a lost dog, or he happened to be cruising through the neighborhood when we both knew our asses were supposed to be back home, he'd tell me to jump in, and I'd look back at Ma's brick house thinking I'd escaped something. I kept expecting Gran to run out after me, her house shoes scrubbing the concrete.

To make things worse, Gran had picked up a phrase I couldn't stand. She'd say, *If you keep acting like your father*, and she may as well have been taking a bat to the back of my skull. Every time she messed up my room, I'd make sure my box-spring was untouched, and then fix everything back, but one day I came home to find Gran sitting on top of my mattress. The sheets had been pulled off the bed and thrown onto the floor. There was candy everywhere. All of my stash, all of my hard earned steals, where out in the open around her, and she sat petting a pair of my stolen Jordan's as the stink of her cigarettes swirled between us.

I hated her. I hated everything, and all I could think about was how I had that fire. From the moment I woke up that day, I had that fire. For that entire summer, I'd had that fire.

I ran into her room, and began tearing everything down. I ran my arm along her dresser, knocking over her perfumes and creams. I tore the sheets off her bed.

“Darius!” she screamed, “Darius!”

I came to the cabinet with the music boxes in it. Some of them were rusted enough to give you tetanus, some of them were new with the metallic green and purple bruises that shine through copper like its blushing. I stared at the music boxes through the frosted glass, but I could not touch them. For all the shit that Gran put me through, for all that fire growling inside of me, I could not touch them. I am not like him, I thought. I am only a halfway crook.

Loving-kindness

On Mondays, my cousin Leigh would take me with her to do yoga on the cement floor of an empty bar where a DJ played ambient, electronic music and the walls were all lined with candles in mason jars. No matter how many times she took me, I refused to buy my own mat, and so I would have to borrow one from the instructor who was beautiful and long-limbed like a mantis. It was always the late afternoon class for older people. There was a woman with long white dreadlocks coiled atop her head like a nest of albino snakes, and there were thin men in leggings with splashes of silver swimming through the curls of their hair. These were the people Leigh wanted to be like, organic, salt of the earth types who could still do cartwheels at sixty.

I was seventeen, Leigh twenty-three, and 9/11 had just happened. I was afraid of getting Anthrax. I was afraid of the Pakistani man tending the gas station down the street.

I would count the American flag stickers on the bumpers of cars on the highway, and I knew that all of that pride had to stand for something. If the world erupted in war, there was no doubt that we would all join hands and fight for our right to air conditioning and vitamin enriched bread. There were all these things happening in the world outside of the candlelit bar, and I could feel the hysteria, the fear, the loss seeping into me like the cold of the cement floor.

Leigh and I would sit, side-by-side, our mats staggered so that our arms would not bump during the slow warm-up windmills. We would cycle through from cat pose, to downward dog, to cobra, repeatedly until we felt as though we'd gone through some kind of reverse evolution from all of the standing and crouching like animals. I remember towards the end of the class, we would meditate, our palms facing upwards, our legs in half lotus. We were supposed to clear our minds, and I would try to imagine a white room, but instead I saw buildings set aflame and babies crying. The instructor would say *imagine loving-kindness spreading from your heart to all sentient beings,* and I would imagine a kind of sunshine radiating from my body. Sometimes I would imagine a kind of smoke. The loving-kindness was tangible and I could mold and coil it around the people close to me. I could imagine it diffusing through their skin, and their skin would glow like a heated furnace or a rash spreading from the shoulders to the arms.

That was the year Leigh first met Bilal, a dark, handsome boy with a ruddy red scar in the center of his eyebrows like a Hindu bride. He called it his "third eye," and when I first asked him how he got it, he wouldn't tell. Every Monday, after yoga, he would be in the parking lot waiting for Leigh, leaning coolly against the door of his maroon Honda Accord, the paint peeling like the shell of a boiled egg. The white lines of

the parking lot had yet to be painted, and where the individual spaces should have stripped the ground, there were large cracks in the asphalt as if the fluffy dandelions and blades of grass that had once ruled the area before were ferociously trying to nudge their way back up through the black tar. Now, there was just asphalt, and concrete, the rows of temporarily abandoned cars, and Bilal.

Bilal's "third eye" was the subject of constant conversation between Leigh and I. It was the awkward beauty mark in his otherwise seamless face, and one evening as I stood shivering slightly in the old parking lot with Bilal, waiting for Leigh to change out of her compression shorts and into civilian clothing, I asked him, once again, about the shiny red scar.

"Maybe, in a past life, you were a unicorn," I said. "Maybe you should do yoga with us. Maybe your brow chakra is unclean." My fists were clinched in the pockets of my hoodie. I could not talk and be still at the same time. I wobbled from foot-to-foot like a penguin. Yoga was good for me.

Bilal plucked the glowing cigarette from his lips and held it a hairs width from my forehead, causing my temple to film with sweat. I looked straight into the thick bristles of his eyelashes. I knew he would not burn me, and yet, a part of me waited, expecting to hear some searing hiss. He had the type of attractiveness that could do no wrong. He had the foolish look of a child, of a man who bruised easily.

"Got ya,'" he said, flicking the cigarette onto the asphalt, and I laughed nervously, wondering if I could have just stood there and listened to the sizzle of my own skin. I wondered if meditation could really erase pain, if I could finally succeed in picturing the white room and nothing else.

At night, I would have dreams of Bilal in which our faces would be so close that we would swallow each other's breaths, and his eyes would take on the lazy look of a demon dreaming. We were always in a cave where the stalactites and dirty icicles would hang like spears over our heads, and the walls of the cave would tremble with the sounds of people screaming and the glass of skyscraper buildings crashing to the ground.

One Monday Leigh got sick and I made it to yoga alone, commandeering my parent's stick shift, engaging the clutch too quickly and stalling when the traffic lights switch green. Again, I tried imagining the loving-kindness and this time it was like a fine mist, settling upon everyone like dew. When the class was over, Bilal was there as always waiting in the parking lot, and without a word we slipped smoothly into his car and I glided my fingertips along the dark arc of his collarbone counting to myself, *one…two…three…four…five..* "third eyes" and they seem to go on into the dozens, pocking his ribcage and the undersides of his arms. When it was over, I could hear his stomach growling, and his hands searched for my socks. He helped me put on my shoes, tied the laces and everything. He had elegant, thin hands, and I could see the outline of the bones moving underneath the skin as he looped the black laces into bows. I thought about how I had not had my shoes tied by someone else since I was a little girl, but I did nothing to stop him.

That following Monday, and all of the Monday's after that, Bilal was no longer there in the parking lot waiting, and when Leigh and I switch from warrior-one, to warrior-two, to triangle pose, to tree, with the otherworldly music humming in the background, I wondered if she too was thinking about Bilal. I wondered if her loving-kindness was as all-encompassing as air or if it was like some passion serum, honey-

colored in a syringe that could be injected into the ones you wanted to save the most. When we left the bar, our eyes would scan the dim parking lot searching, but there was no one there, and at night, my dreams of burning buildings and the planes of my country were replaced by a pair of nimbly working hands and a path of glowing third eyes tracing the outline of a shirtless boy.

Perfect Brother

At our mother's funeral, my brother Nathan sat beside me, his elbow resting on the pew's arm and his fingers squeezing his temples while I sat painstakingly still and straight like fishing line was yanking me up by the scalp. "Death should be a celebration!" said the preacher gripping the pulpit like a ship's helm. The preacher wore delicate, circular glasses like John Lennon. *I bet he knows how to play the guitar*, I thought. *I bet he knows how to sing a few ballads.* I was trying not to think of my mother in the coffin in front of us. Nathan had picked out her outfit, a bright red pantsuit and clunky gold rings knotting her knuckles. I imagined my mother in this getup atop some marbled staircase fogged up by clouds. In both life and death, she had reminded me of a Vegas showgirl. I wanted to grab the mic from the John Lennon look-alike and say, "My mother was like a Vegas showgirl! She was raspy and glamorous and wore blue eye shadow without shame," but my time on the stand had passed. My mother was survived

by Nathan and I, and that was it. I had seen our father once, at the age of three, but he was gone before Nathan was born. Nathan and I had each given our embarrassing though appropriate speeches, riddled with sobs that shook our bodies like hiccups.

Evan as kids we had been afraid of losing her the way anyone is afraid of losing anything that they think is a part of themselves. I thought back to that one summer, when Nathan returned home for good after his third semester at NYU, and I came back reclaiming custody of my old bedroom with a degree in Hebrew and Judaic Studies from Bryn Mawr, we discovered our mother's faded blue birth certificate on the kitchen table along with other important papers scattered about like party steamers. She was trying to get her passport renewed. One of her many friends, divorced and without children, had a summer home in Antigua and had invited her to visit. She had begun buying big, Kentucky Derby sized sunhats and floated all through the house delighting in the thought of wicker-weaved ceiling fans and sea front views.

"That can't be right," Nathan had said, holding the birth certificate up to his face.

He pulled his cellphone from his pocket to subtract the present year form the past.

"Apparently, Mom's been forty-four for the past five years," he said.

"That's okay," I had said back, but really it was not okay. Forty-nine was almost fifty, and fifty was half of everything. Sixty-five, and she'd be gone from us, peaceful and in bed like she'd planned it all along.

"Even when you two cough, I get afraid," she used to say, crushing a Vitamin C tablet between two spoons and dissolving the powder in a splash of orange juice for one of us to swallow. For every phase of life there were things that threatened to kill us: first chicken pox, then Mono. When Nathan was nineteen he had contracted a relatively

harmless STD, and I'd thought him to be so reckless and dumb that I grabbed him by the shoulders, shook him, and told him to stop. Just stop. As adults we feared diabetes and cancer. When Nathan first brought his long-term boyfriend over for Christmas dinner, a ruthlessly handsome Black man named Jess, I recited the statistics for him: 3 out of every 4. Even the smudged face of Alzheimer's looked out at us from a distance, but nothing was as bad as losing her.

"Your mother was perfect," Jess said to me after the funeral, shaking my hand in both of his as if to keep me from sliding down to the floor.

"Wasn't she?" I asked. I wanted him to go on. My mother, the perfect. I scanned my mother's house for Nathan. There were people everywhere, mostly older women slicing chunks of Brie onto gourmet crackers. In her later years, my mother had been the first to start up a "Stich n' Bitch" group at a local coffee shop. She was what one would describe as a "flaming liberal" and practically famous.

"Nate ran off to the bathroom," Jess said, noticing my eyes dart like a Golden Retriever's, "I'm not good at this kind of thing, but I don't like losing people."

Over the years, I had fallen in love with Jess. He was good-looking and sturdy like a fireman. He taught British literature at a high school up in Brooklyn and could recite most of Lord Byron's poems by heart. He brought me in for a hug and I felt about as tall as his knee-cap. Nathan was lucky to have him, especially at a time like this.

When all the guests had gone home, Nathan and I sat around our mother's room lacing pearls around our necks and crunching on the old mints we found in the pockets of her mink coats. The minks had all been left to me. There were four in all, and Nathan and I had chosen a pair of floor length winter whites to wear over our mourning clothes.

"We should have just worn these," Nathan said, flipping the fur collar of the coat up around his neck.

It was cold enough outside to cause nose bleeds. During the burial service, I had liked the cold. It made me feel like I had temporarily taken up residence in an icepack.

"Jess is good to you," I said.

Nathan span around in his mink, "Jess is good to everybody."

I held my hand out to him. We were taking large gulps from a bottle of gold rum that we'd found wrapped secretly in a towel in the back of our mother's sock drawer. Glum and in our furs, we felt a little bit like gangsters lamenting the end of prohibition. I wanted the night to both end and carry on forever. I wanted Nathan to say with me. I wanted us to cry together till we shriveled up like fingers in a bathtub.

In four days all of our mother's beautiful things would be packed and stored away. Nathan would get all of her clothes with the exception of the white minks, and I would get all of her jewelry separated and tucked away in large red velvet boxes. Nathan returned to New York and Jess, and I went back to Wilmington where my hushed and single apartment life soon became hauntingly lonely. I was the type of thirty-seven year old who had called her mother nearly every day. We talked of palates and sweet potato fries. We became vegans together, two weeks at a time. I would scroll through the archives of my phone, the screen glowing bright in my small bedroom, the duvet cover pulled up and over my head like a child reading a comic by flashlight. "Missed Call from Mom," Missed Call from Mom." I regretted little things like that.

Two months after our mother's death, Nathan and I were as good as estranged. We had spoken to each other only two times and both instances had been about our

mother. Once on the anniversary of her birthday May 10th, and then the next day, on mother's day May 11th. I wondered how Nathan could be so calm, so dignified in his grief. He hardly seemed sad at all, and I was immensely jealous. On the anniversary of her birthday, he called me.

"I feel weird," he said when I picked up the phone.

"Maybe I should find someone. Settle down." I said. The quietness of my apartment was getting to me, and I was considering looking into finding a husband or a dog.

"I feel weird," he repeated. We were talking like toddlers, wrapped in the circus of our own thoughts. I imagined Nathan sitting in his sunny apartment, his legs crossed in a four, ankle-to-knee, and his foot bouncing up and down as if to a song. I imagined Jess behind him, cupping his shoulders as if giving a massage, and steadying him in a way I never could.

When the people around me were getting married and naming children, when the apartment leases began to ask for the name of a spouse, I remained content and single. Maybe even proud and single, flipping my ring-less hand in the air like Beyoncé.

Every night: "Missed Call from Mom," Missed Call from Mom." This was what it was like to be lonely, too go without one's mother and best friend. I drank coffee. I went to work. On Saturdays, I went out to the beach and watched the people lying about with their thin tan bodies like slivers of golden cods. I watched boys with dreaded hair try to catch waves on the dying surf.

On the first of July, four months after my mother's death, I got a call from Jess.

"Come on up and see us," he said. "We can grill up veggie dogs or cauliflower. Whatever you want."

I had never been to New York during the fourth of July. "Why doesn't Nathan call me," I asked. Nathan and Jess with their perfect city life and minor holidays. Jess had become the go-between. It was like Nathan did not even care.

"He's all about the *text*, now. You know he couldn't initiate a conversation if it was 911," Jess laughed.

I thought of my phone, "Missed Call from Mom." I had begun to get afraid that my call history would simply delete itself and that she would be even more gone than she already was.

"You two are great," I said. Really, Jess was great. Nathan on the other hand had practically slipped away from me overnight.

"Okay then," he said. "I'll have you down for two veggie dogs and a side of grilled cauliflower with Cajun spice."

On the fourth, I stood on the rooftop of Nathan and Jess's Brooklyn apartment. Everyone was thin and beautiful and untouched by death or even crow's feet. Nathan had greeted me at the door. It was the first time I had seen him since the week of the funeral, and I had wanted him to look as bad as I did. A paper Uncle Sam's hat was balanced precariously on his head, and his hair had gotten longer somehow and was fastened in a neat brown ponytail at the nape of his neck. He looked fine. I cradled a store bought peach cobbler in my arms.

"O hey there O sister O mine," Nathan said, the whites of his eyes red and watery.

"You, my dear, are knee-walking drunk," I said, bopping him on the nose with affection.

Nathan raised a long-stemmed goblet of wine in the air. "To Liberty!" he said and downed the goblet just like that.

For the rest of the evening, we avoided each other. I talked to Jess. I looked out below us at the Dominican children twirling sparklers through the air. When it finally got dark, and the first fireworks began exploding into the skyline, I snuck back inside leaving everyone else sitting in their beach chairs on the roof.

I wandered through Nathan and Jess's pristine apartment, stopping to rearrange the magnetic poetry on their fridge. There were only two lines among the collection of mix-matched words:

"IF YOU MAKE OFF WITH MY HEART CAN I LIVE," and "HE DARK SKIN AND BAD BUT EASY LIKE RELAX."

"I made that one," Nathan said, coming up beside me and pointing to the second, slightly less poetic line.

"I didn't hear you come in," I said.

"I snuck off to bed to sleep off a bit of the liberty," he said.

He was still drunk, but slightly less so.

"We repainted the bedroom last week," he said. "Wanna see! Wanna see!" He jumped a bit in place as the sound of fireworks bombed outside.

They had painted the bedroom a deep grey color and a turquoise frosted glass lantern hung from the high ceiling.

I took a seat on the corner of their quilted bed. It was impossibly soft. Instantly, I wanted to fall back onto it. I imagined the memory foam forming up around my body until I disappeared. I had the sudden desire to be smothered. I wanted to lift the mattress up and lay beneath it sandwiched above the box spring.

"How are you so happy without her?" I asked. I had been waiting to ask it all along. I wanted to know his secret, how he appeared to be uncrippled by loss.

Without a word, Nathan walked over to their vanity set. It was white and mirrored like the kind found in girl's bedrooms. He opened a drawer and the room was enveloped with the smell of my mother. My mother had smelled like incents and coconut water shampoo. Nathan took out a tube of my mother's lipstick and glided it seamlessly around the O of his mouth. He slid off his jeans and pulled his T-shirt over his head revealing his shaved and bony chest. I wanted to tell him to stop. I wanted to clap my hands like a governess and snap him out of it, but he was already scrunching up a pair of our mother's sheer pantyhose and slipping them up over his legs where his height made them hang like skin toned harem pants at his crotch. He fished into the drawer for a fuchsia dress slip that my mother had used as a nightgown and as a cover-up while cooking breakfast or getting the mail. He put the slip on and took out his ponytail, combing his mousy brown hair around his face with his fingers.

"Do I look like her?" Nathan asked his voice crackling like a child's.

I got up and stood in front of him. I straightened the thin twisted straps of our mother's slip so that they lay straight against his pale collarbone. As soon as I finished, he hugged me, stooping to bury his face into the curve of my neck. He hugged me as if

I'd fall apart, as if he'd known that I'd been contemplating living in the space underneath his mattress.

"My perfect brother," I whispered petting his soft baby-like hair as we stood in his bedroom away from everyone, away from celebration, trying to be like our mother who was no longer there.

Parakeets

When our grandson whom you will never get to see shoots one of our sky dappled parakeets through the chest with his bow and arrow (the ones that sit side-by-side as if cold) I am only thinking of you and the night you fell upon tickets for us to go see Annie at the Fox Theater. I am seeing you standing before the bedroom closet, your patent leather shoes like an old bus driver's. You are pulling out rumpled button-downs and holding each one out for me to choose. You say, "Is this one good? How 'bout this one?" Each one the same, and I am explaining the difference between navy and black, the way two stripped patterns must run in the same direction, the way something tacky, like poke-a-dots, can go with anything.

You are stalling, and I know you do not want to see the play, so I run out of the room, heels clacking to put on the mascara I have forgotten. I see your face in the mirror behind me, and you say, "That stuff makes you look like a whore."

I reflect on how I have never slapped anyone in my adult life. I am mouse quiet. I am statue still, and so we are out the door, in our seats, and as I am watching the orphaned children pounce across the stage the word "whore" gallops through my head till I think there is nothing left of it at all, till I think that there is only you and me and the singing orphans and the Fox with all of its glamour.

Our grandson whom you will never get to see cries because perhaps he has not expected the bird to bleed. He is a delicate child, the type to step on ant hills and cry for the ants, and yet he is responsible for our little bird skewered and puffed up at the end of an arrow like a fluffy marshmallow coated in blue down. I am scooping our little bird in a small plastic sack. Maybe I will save it to be buried. Maybe I will throw it into the trash bin when our grandson is not looking.

I do not know, but I am thinking of that night you called me a whore. I keep seeing you in front of the bedroom closet, and this time, I am saying to you, "Wear the one I got you for Christmas," and you tell me that you gave it away. You tell me that it was ugly, and I think you could have pretended to not find it. I think of all your gifts that I have given away. The soapstone jewelry box with the sphinx on it. The charcoal pictures you drew. There is nothing really left of you in our house save the parakeets, and one of them is no longer alive. I could roll a spoonful of peanut butter in flax seeds and lure the other one into my hand. I could break its neck quick, assume it would die of being lonely, but I do not know.

Frost

My little brother Lawrence and I were raised in a one story yellow house on BeeBlossom Trail where the neighbor's Chinese wife would walk around naked with the blinds wide open, and our mother would have to shoo our father away from the window. Back then, all Lawrence wanted in life was a dog, and when I was six, I fashioned a leash out of an old jump rope and fixed it around his neck. I dragged him, on all fours, through the bedroom we shared, over the Barbie and Star Wars print sheets. I teased him mercilessly. I would pour his apple juice into bowls and set them under the kitchen table for him to lap at. When he came to me begging to trade anything, everything for the stuffed puppies I owned –pleading specifically for a mini Beanie Baby cocker spaniel, I'd slam the thing hard against walls and wring it out in my fist in front of him. Lawrence would look at me horrified as if the thing were real. As if I were actually pitching a live puppy through the air, or stomping it into the ground, or ripping its ears from its head and

slipping it into his hands saying, “you can have it, now.” I believed with all forty-nine pounds of my scrawny girl body that little boys needed to cry at regular intervals or else they’d forget how, get too rowdy, and end up like my older cousin Reggie who’d gotten the planet Mars tattooed on the side of his stomach when he was seventeen.

At the time, our father was a corrections officer down at the DeKalb county jail, and he would tell stories over the dinner table about grown men crying like clowns in their bright orange.

“Bunch of sissies, all of ‘em,” our father would say, scrunching up his nose in disgust, and I would feel like I needed to protect Lawrence from something. Like it was up to me to make sure he turned out right.

He was so crazy about dogs, and I blamed it on all the stories our mother read us about those sled teams in Alaska where the huskies would dig borrows into the snowdrifts to save themselves from winters that would freeze a man’s eyelashes to needles. We had no such winters in Georgia, and no such dogs around BeeBlossom where the occasional pregnant stray could be caught nosing through a garbage bag on the curb, or trotting away from the neighborhood kids swinging sticks.

Our father tended to turn us loos in the summer. He’d tell me that sunshine and sprinkler water would make my hair grow, as my mother used to wet my hair before whacking away at it with the kitchen shears, and my brown curls always turned out shorter once dried. I was always angry at the little flaws in my appearance. My hair was never long enough. My teeth never straight.

Our mother would send us outside after breakfast, giving Lawrence and I water bottles and telling us to knock on the door and holler if we got thirsty.

"Any Husky you dream of having's gonna die in this heat," I remember saying to Lawrence one summer as he and I leaned coolly into the shade of a telephone pole, waiting desperately for an ice cream truck's lilt to rescue us.

"Dogs don't sweat," Lawrence said. He was four at the time and already too smart for his own good. He'd start up sniffling anytime he got less than five gold stars on his progress report. I always got docked for running my moth during quiet time, but to my credit, I never came home acting all shy about it.

"That don't mean they don't die," I said, and Lawrence winced, "die" being a bad word at that age along with things like "stupid," and "hate," and anything else generally unpleasant. He once told on me to our mother saying, "Ella said the K-work," and when our mother asked him to spell it, so she'd understand, he whispered "K-I-L-L" into her ear.

"You shouldn't say that," Lawrence said calmly, taking a seat on the grass, and ripping the green blades from their roots before quickly packing them back in place.

"You ask for a dog again, and Daddy'll put you out," I said, as Lawrence tossed a fistful of grass in my direction.

He had a habit of throwing things back then, but with the faulty motor skills of a child, nothing ever hit me. Thinking back, I like to believe that he missed on purpose, that he was that good of a kid, the type that would sweep daddy long leg spiders out of the house instead of killing them.

On Lawrence's fifth birthday, with our mother and father and I standing around in the dark with Lawrence's baby blue candles all ablaze and dripping wax onto the buttercream, he whispered, "I want a dog," into the flames when he should have closed

those big eyes of his and made a wish. Lawrence was what our father described as “soft spoken,” and our father could not raise a soft spoken boy.

“Can’t you speak up?” our father asked.

“I want a dog,” Lawrence repeated, his voice crackling.

“But you’re afraid of dogs,” I said, and before our parents could speak, I brought up Grandma’s two poodles, Pepper and Corn, whom I knew terrified Lawrence as they were both dingy, blind things with eyes like concrete globes embedded into their mop-like faces. I went on about how he was too little, a baby, and Lawrence could no longer hold back the flood of liquid flowing from nose and eyes. He grabbed at his ears and head as if the blood coursing through his veins was combusting. Everything about him was red and fire. I thought he’d pinch the still burning candles from the cake and hurl them at me.

“Maybe when you’re older,” our mother said, trying to calm him. Lawrence was in her arms now. She bounced him on the side of her hip, his bony legs dangling.

“If you don’t put him down…,” our father said, and I blew out Lawrence’s candles, and the house turned from glowing orange to black, and Lawrence sobbed louder, but I didn’t feel a thing.

That night, as lay in bed, my comforter coiled like a cocoon around me, I heard Lawrence’s little voice in the darkness.

“Why are you so mean to me?” he asked from his twin bed across the room.

I tried to make out the lump of his body under the covers. I tried to see the soft oval of his face. I had always hated Lawrence’s birthdays in the typical manner of siblings, because they weren’t mine. Why am I so mean to you, I thought, why am I so mean to you?

I made a loud wheezing sound, pretending to snore. I heard the soft squeak of Lawrence's bedsprings as he turned away from me. I did not hate him in any sense. Hate was like a wild animal. Hate was like a Tasmanian devil in a terrier's crate. It was uncontrollable. I just did not like him being happy when I was not. Some would even call it a part of love, the demand for synchrony of emotions. Lawrence's helpless voice, at all times barely above a whisper, was unbearable. He could not demand anything. Even for the most urgent of circumstances, he was unable to call anyone out from across a room. His arm could have been broken. His right eye could have been falling out of his skull, and he'd still creep up behind you, tap you on the shoulder, and say, "excuse me." I imagined him calling a dog to him, patting his knees and whispering, "here boy-here boy." Why was I so mean to him? Why was I so mean?

From then on, I tried, in the naïve and pitiful way of a child, to be nicer to my brother. Years passed, and soon I started school at Locus Grove Middle where I had big dreams of glamorizing a 9 by 12 inch locker that was bound to remain the same drab grey by the end of the year. I had two quart sized Ziploc bags full of gel pens, and I knew how to fold notes into hearts. I had developed the art of knowing, from the moment I woke up, whether or not I would wear my hair up or down, and I'd keep it that way the whole day which meant I was real put-together by 6th grade standards. If you asked me anything, I'd respond with "sure," just "sure." That's how *cool* I was. My "boyfriend," Julian Batts, who I played footsie with in Social Studies, once flashed me a condom under the classroom table. He'd stolen it from his brother's wallet.

"Do you know what this is?" he whispered to me smiling.

"Duh," I said back, rolling my eyes, but I hadn't the slightest clue, and so I was flashed into the realm of the popular.

Lawrence, on the other hand, was the reigning record holder for Accelerated Reader points and helped Mrs. Valentine's 5th grade class to win a pizza party the last Friday of every month. He was the nerd king of James D. Watson Elementary, and the way I saw it, he was destined to be one of those boys who shamefully changed clothes in the bathroom stalls of locker rooms. Lawrence still wanted a dog, but made it known in more discrete ways. He'd wake up early in the morning to watch some Georgia Public Broadcasting show on therapy dogs down at Grady Hospital, and sometimes I would catch him, in the early morning in front of the TV's glow scooping handfuls of dry Froot Loops into his mouth. Sometimes I would sit beside him, my hand outstretched for a share of cereal.

"Ever thought about being a vet," I said one morning. There was a montage of Labrador retriever puppies on the screen, some flopping joyfully through the hospital's halls others passing out mid-step.

Transfixed by the dogs, Lawrence shrugged his shoulders. At times like that, I though him too wise for his age. Except for the dog, he only wanted things within reach. The far future was impenetrable to him. What would happen would happen weather he fought for it or not.

That year, around Easter, when I had been fighting my mother to let me wear my pink church dress without the crochet poncho Grandma made for me, a navy blue pick-up parked itself on the side of our house in the middle of the night and dumped a slim, shirtless man onto the white rocks that lined the dirt around our mailbox. Our father was

a paranoid man and had cut away all of the bushed that grew against our house, reasoning that no one could hide in them and get up. The shirtless man wobbled up to our front door. He banged and kicked at it, our father nocking back and yelling but keeping the door chain in its place. We heard the wiz of piss against the wood of our front door, the honk of a horn, the instant day of headlights shining through the curtains, as the man disappeared with the screeching of tires.

After that, we had reason for a dog, and our father made plans to get us one for protection. Lawrence was thrilled. Our father wanted a German Shepard, it being a police breed, and we found a sort of backwoods breeder promising purebreds for three hundred, eight-two dollars and seventy-five cents a pup. Our father shelled out the money, but never let Lawrence and I forget it. He held up the check, and had us read the number to him five times before we got out of the car to choose which one of the three leftover puppies we wanted. The breeder, a fat, pale woman in UGA sweatpants, brought them from the backyard, all three squirming awkwardly in her thick arms.

Lawrence had read up, of course. He did three tests on those puppies, sitting them in his lap, flipping them on their backs, and holding them up in the air. All the while, the mother dog, big and bat-eared whined from the fence and pawed the grass.

Lawrence settled on the smallest puppy that was more brown than black with a muzzle that seemed smushed-in compared to the others.

“This one,” he said, holding the puppy up for our father to see. The puppy didn’t wiggle or nip at Lawrence’s fingers. Our father leaned in as if looking into a microscope.

“He’s got a calm temperament,” Lawrence said.

The puppy sniffed lazily at our father without wagging its tail.

"I think we can do better than that," our father said, lifting the fattest puppy off the ground and holding it up by the scruff of its neck. It growled trying to shake its head loose.

"You're going to tear its skin," Lawrence piped, rescuing the puppy from our father's grip as the breeder checked her step forward. This should have been the first sign that we were not fit to raise an animal, but the breeder was already putting the fat puppy into an open cardboard box, and Lawrence was already giving the puppy with the calm temperament a goodbye scratch behind the ears.

Lawrence named the puppy Frost, it being something he'd probably had in his mind from all those snow dog stories, and our father thought Frost a decent name for a guard dog, but that was about all the say0so Lawrence got. Our father insisted that, to become a good guard dog, Frost could not get familiar with anybody outside of our family lest he get used to everybody's scent and lose the ability to tell friend from foe. Lawrence's free range dreams of Frost following sensibly at his heels, or Frost trotting a few feet ahead, leash-less were killed. Out father made sure that we only walked him around the parameter of our house -from the tee to the telephone pole and back.

Lawrence volunteered to train Frost, promising that he would have basic commands down in a couple months through the aid of a spray bottle containing a vinegar-water mix that he claimed to be the most humane way to go about things, but the poppers were our father's idea. Our father would wrap rolled up newspapers in duct tape and give Frost a swat on the nose anytime he barked or nipped, anytime he missed the rectangle of newsprint Lawrence laid out for him. Lawrence would try to hide the

poppers, and our father would make new ones until Lawrence started hiding the duct tape too.

When Frost got big enough, we put him outside. Our father fenced in our back yard in the name of that dog, making Lawrence and I chant three-hundred eighty two dollars and seventy five cents whenever he forced us to help dig holes for the posts. Frost ran back and forth so much that his paw-sweeps killed the grass, creating long dirt arks wherever he traveled. He barked at everything: squirrels, pollen, cars. Some nights he'd be at it like a song, and our father would yell from his bedroom for Frost to shut up, until Lawrence took it upon himself to sneak out there with a handful of saltine crackers to keep Frost quiet.

Whenever our father phoned home saying he planned to go out for a drink with his boys, and our mother was busy locked up in her bedroom either napping or watching her shows, Lawrence would let Frost inside. Frost would zoom through the house as if trying to wear the same bare arcs into the rough thread of our carpet. Out mother ignored it, she let Lawrence have his fun. The day our father came home early, Frost zoomed straight into the wooden leg of our kitchen table, breaking it off completely and sending down a hailstorm of dishes and newspapers, a flowerless glass vase we had set on the tabletop to give the bare dining area a more festive appeal. Lawrence was on Frost in an instant, checking his paws for shards of ceramic or glass, but our father got ahold of him. He shoved Lawrence out of the way and began punching Frost on his flanks, holding him in place by the collar as his knuckles beat his fluffy sides like a drum.

Lawrence screamed. Screamed like a tribesman going into war. If the instinct had not been taken out of him, if my brother had not been such a soft spoken child, I am sure

he would have fought our father. He would have lunged at him, like a tick to a thigh, and our father would have batted him off just as easy. Instead, Lawrence fell to the floor shanking, and only then did our father stop, as Frost ran free whining like a broken whistle into Lawrence's arms.

Why are you so mean? I thought, looking steadily at our father as he stumbled drunkenly to his bedroom and shut the door. There were cruelties in the world that one could not control. There were things that needed saving and protection and rest. At that moment, I wanted to rewind everything. We should not have gotten a dog. If Lawrence's affection could have been like a wall, protecting Frost from everything our family would have put him through then everything would be okay, but nothing was okay. Why were we so mean, I thought, whey were we so mean?

That night, as Lawrence and I lay awake in our room listening to Frost bark away outside in the backyard, I heard Lawrence whisper again as he had when we were little.

"I should not have asked for a dog," he said, his voice no longer soft but cold now with a bitterness I could grab with both hands and eat.

I listened to Frost's barking, the deep echo seeming just inches away from my ears.

"I'm sorry," I said into the dark room. I could sense that Lawrence was no longer in his bed. He was standing, pulling my covers away from me.

"Get up," he whispered in the same icy chill.

I got up and followed him out to the backyard. Frost ran up to the back door as soon as he heard the knob turn. He cocked his head to the side at the sight of Lawrence

and I both out so late to greet him. He sniffed our hands to see if we'd brought something. They were empty.

"Three-hundred eighty two dollars and seventy five cents," I heard Lawrence say under his breath as he looked down at Frost. Frost had grown to be a big dog, a little too fluffy for his breed, but he had this sort of wild elegance that made your fingers ache to touch the spidery velvet of his ears. I thought we had come outside to apologize, that Lawrence had specifically brought me into the night air to coax Frost out of any PTSD he may have experienced due to the traumatic events of the day.

Lawrence took Frost's collar off, and began making his way to the fence.

"What are you doing?" I asked, walking brisk and barefoot through the damp grass to match Lawrence's determined stride.

Lawrence did not answer, and Frost trailed beside us in a sort of zigzag way, nipping at our pajama pants and then darting off to see if we'd take up the chase. Lawrence undid the fence latch. He threw the door wide open, and Frost flew through it like lightning, like he'd been waiting his entire life for Lawrence to do it, but within a few seconds, Frost came back. He circled the front yard a few time and looked back at us with those onyx pebble eyes of his.

"Get!" Lawrence yelled stomping his foot into the pawed grass. I understood what Lawrence was doing, but it did not seem right.

Frost took off running, his black fur bleeding into the darkness and the light brown streaks of his tail feathering into the air. The thing my brother had wanted most in life was disappearing, and he expected me to stand by him and watch. I curled my toes into the dirt. I took a deep breath and ran into the night, the shadowy silhouette of Frost

forever in front of me, and I would keep running, I would keep searching after him, until the shine of morning washed everything in grey.

Love of My Life

The love of my life, a girl named Helena, used to roll her joints with the back pages of the Bible, as we would sit in her bedroom with the horse wallpaper. She was a small, waiflike German girl who wore only black colored clothing embellished with varying degrees of tissue fluff and cat hair, and she had that dark, dark humor that Germans tend to have. We were fifteen and enamored with the idea of melancholia, and so we had begun cutting little slits into our wrists, into the meat of our shoulders, into the slight bulges above our kneecaps. In the string of summer months we had spent etching tally marks into our flesh and getting high off pot and the red ink of the New Testament, she would remind me that I was lucky. She had an accent so lovely you would think she was faking it, and she would tell me that everything about me was combined well enough. A slight change and I would border on ugly. Broaden my shoulders anymore, and I would transform into a handsome boy instead of an androgynously dressed girl.

Helena had a habit of making such comments while talking a little too close to my face. She had large lemur-like eyes that were neither alluring nor cute but rather, uncanny like those of an abused doll, and despite all of this, I thought she was beautiful. I wanted to be her, to carve out her chest and live inside behind the bone.

We were both very rich girls with parents who were not yet divorced, and so we firmly believed that we had no right to be both affluent and happy. Every day, in the Summer, I would go over to Helena's house which was big and brick and gated, and we would spend so much time locked up in her girlish, horse themed room, that we had come to associate home not with the house itself, but rather, with the bed we would lay in, and we wondered if that made us ungrateful. Perhaps we could take it a step further and say that it was not just the bed at all. Possibly, home for us was the entire room, but only with the door closed. Open the door and you broke it.

Helena had a big wooden bed with carved posts and I remember us lying on the bed and going through the horses on her bedroom walls trying to remember what she had named them back when she first moved to America and still liked horses. I would guess a name. Cinnamon if the horse was brown. Snowflake if it was white, and the plumes of smoke would float lazily around us.

One day, giving up on our game, she turned to me and said, "Have you ever licked the top of your own mouth? Does it tickle you?"

I slid my tongue along the ribbed topside of my jaw. It gave me a fluttering feeling, and I kept doing it because I was high and because I did not know what to say. We were falling in love with each other, the love feeling carving odd canals in us, and I

was afraid of what could go wrong. I was afraid of our friendship blooming into something we both knew would die.

"I have always wanted to try," she said, "to shove my tongue there on someone. To see if they laugh or will have to force the vomit back."

I could tell that this was her attempt at coming on to me. I rolled on top of her and made loud hacking sounds, pretending to vomit in her face. Maybe that was my idea of being sexy. Maybe in some twisted, ironic way, all of the affection was making me want to throw up. We were so close, she could have slid her fingers into the waistband of my jeans and I would not have pushed her away. But she just laid there looking up at me with her sad baby doll eyes, and I knew that I had done the wrong thing. I should have shoved my tongue into her mouth, but the moment had passed.

Another day, we were renaming the horses as though they were the bringers of the apocalypse, and Helena laid face up with a bleeding wrist in her mouth. We were not the most creative, but we had deemed ourselves cleaver by naming them all Night-mares One-through-Seventeen.

"I am hurting," Helena said as if it was the only English she knew.

"Let me see." I pulled her wrist from her lips. The gash was too deep. Deeper than I had ever seen her do. Not deep enough to kill her, but deep enough to be scary. It was not one of the usual vertical ticks we drew. It was a horizontal one across the bone, but I refused to make a big deal out of it or see it for what it may have really meant. We were living a shadowy performance of a life, where everything was dramatic and unimportant. She was so helpless looking and pale with the veins in her arms showing blue that I found the whole scene creepily charming. I could not imagine her really wanting to hurt herself,

really wanting to leave me and the rest of the world behind. If she was serious, I would have followed her, no questions asked. I saw her as an extension of myself, a spirit twin from a different womb. We had to be happy at the same time. We had to be sad at the same time. If she was cutting herself more, so was I. I let go of her wrist, my fingers stained red as if I had been holding a broken pen. I did not really know what to do, so I said, "You really are somethin'," and got her a towel to soak up the blood.

At one point, we got the idea to take a sharpie to her horses' eyes and to draw in devil horns and demon wings. We stacked thick books on top of her posh, heavy furniture and stood drawing as we talked about the ways in which we wanted to die. I wanted to be defending something. A flock of sheep. A child from Somalia. I wanted to be wielding a sward to keep some zombie apocalypse at bay. Helena did not care how she died as long as her body stayed intact. She wanted to be buried in a marbled, egg-shaped coffin.

"White marble with black and grey veins," she said nodding her head at me as though I should have been taking notes.

She wanted her body to be scrunched up in the fetal position like a half bird humanoid. Whatever future alien civilization dug up her bones would be tricked into thinking she was someone important. They would find her egg and think, *this one was their queen, this one was their best.* She had become so somber that summer, that I thought she was on the verge of crying at any moment, and every word she spoke seemed like the beginning of a poem.

"Sometimes it is like gold flakes of happy. Gold flakes of ecstasy," she would say on good days between puffs, and I would imagine the horses charging with gold specks

glittering in their manes, and we would fall asleep in the most artful ways with our legs intertwined like tree roots.

It took us a week to finish altering all of the horses, and when we were finally done, Helena hopped from her stack of books and said, “Look! We have made them to be like gargoyles.”

I stood on my pile of books and looked up at the ring of demonized horses surrounding us. I once again noticed the smoke and the pungent earthy smell of pot that clung to our cloths like lint. I thought of the word “gargoyle” and how it was something I had not heard said in a long time, how the horse to gargoyle transformation somehow mirrored Helena’s life. Maybe she had not always been so dark. She looked like a Halloween pirate in her long sleeved skull and crossbones T-shirt, and she had on black shorts that showed the perfectly sliced scars above her knees. Throughout all of our friendship, throughout all of our melodrama and teenage angst, I had never felt obligated to undo her sadness. Perhaps I had just seen her as a gargoyle, something innately sad and terrifyingly beautiful. I jumped off of my stack of books and cupped the sides of Helena’s face, squeezing her cheeks together like a puffer fish.

“If you ever die, I won’t tell them you wanted an egg,” I said. “When they try to engrave your coffin with ponies, I won’t tell them you wanted an egg.” I wanted to tell her that she was the love of my life and that I did not want her to be sad forever, but how could I have known anything about love and sadness? I wondered if she was homesick for Germany, and remembered her telling me about her first day in America when, amazed at all the food everyone stored up, she’d fried an entire package of bacon and ate it. I wanted her to smile, to laugh at me and peck me on the cheek.

"I need you to leave," she said, her doll-like eyes, heavy lidded and glassing.

I let go of her face, and the glowing pink of her room transformed to grey. I walked out of her room and down the winding staircase where the plop of my sneakers bounced off of the marbled stair trends and echoed into the stomach of the house. Outside, the sun was setting, painting the sky pastel shades of pink and purple, the cotton candy clouds mimicking the color of Helena's childhood wallpaper. I closed my eyes and saw black stallions trotting so fast that bat wings began to sprout from their hides. Each step I took felt like the thump of a hoof, and I felt myself harden. I was becoming like the gargoyles, and I should have done everything, anything to stop it. The love of my life was suffering, wilting like a poorly placed plant, but I did nothing. I remained lofted and distant and watched.

The Life of a Saint

Julia watched as her grandfather plucked the white plastic tab from a carton of organic milk and began using it to strum his guitar. He played a few notes then shuffled slowly to the kitchen, returning with two Styrofoam plates heaped with Ramen. He held a plate out towards her, and took a sip of coffee from an imperial blue teacup.

"Hummingbirds are the spitting image of wasps," he said, scattering a handful of dry grits outside onto the windowsill.

After a while, the robins and sparrows came flying timidly from the nearby bushes and trees to nip at the white flakes.

Julia and her grandfather sat around the kitchen table on barstools because that was all her grandfather had. The kitchen table was three-legged, circular, and squat. It did not serve as much of a table at all, but it gave the kitchen a center around which to

navigate. On the stools, Julia and her grandfather were too tall, so they both ate with their plates of noodles in their laps and their teacups of coffee on the table inches below.

It was the first time Julia had seen her grandfather in twelve years. He was as old and good-looking as an Indian chief, and she thought it a shame his genes did not catch. Last time she saw him, she had been four years old, basically a baby, and he had not been sick. His oxygen machine rested in the corner like a scuba diver's tank, and Julia was there for the summer getting to know him.

They were on day two, and already, he was unravelling all of the stories she had heard about him. She had thought he would teach her to play Texas Hold'em or how to shoot a pistol at a tree. She had thought him wild as a fox, but every morning her let her sleep in, and she would get up on her own and wander stealthily through the small quiet house to find his hat and rumpled coat missing. He would always be outside checking on his small scrape of collards planted close up against the house's side where he had placed a small plastic alligator to scare the squirrels away.

"Tell me about the time you lost the Cadillac?" Julia asked. It was the most infamous of all stories, and in her mind, it surrounded her grandfather like a black cloud, it being one of the endless possible reasons why she had not seen him in so long.

"We sold that old rag-top," her grandfather replied. "had anti-freeze leaking lime green in the back seats. Probably why your Daddy's got that asthma."

Julia's father had always refused to call her grandfather "Dad" or "Father," or any real name, but rather referred to him only as a "you" or "him" or "he" thereby reducing her grandfather to a fable of a man. In the story Julia knows, her grandfather is both drunk and drugged up on painkillers because of a tooth ache he does not have the money

to fix. He has a young girlfriend, and so he cannot be bothered by his wife and child. He comes home red-eyed, his teeth jutting out over his upper lip in a drunken under bite. It is winter and he stumbles home to Julia's grandmother who opens the front door to find that he has lost the Cadillac forever. His only excuse being that it was nighttime and the Cadillac was black.

The Cadillac story was just one of the many stories she had heard whispered over her bed sheets as a child whenever she would ask what made her grandfather so unlikable, but having met him in her adult life, Julia is no longer sure if the stories are real or legend. For a single man, he has too clean a house, too quiet a life. In his late seventies, he still waters his lawn shirtless and at night so the water sinks in. To Julia, he is a saint, and ever harsh word against him is a lie. He lit up a cigarette and on the exhale began coughing so violently that Julia was afraid something inside of him would come out. She wanted to get off her stool and pat his back the way one would do to a small child, but she was too afraid she would embarrass him.

"Sorry," her grandfather said when his coughing fit was done. He would be embarrassed regardless of what Julia did. He did not know what to say. They were spending most of the summer quietly orbiting around each other.

"When your grandmother first left me, I wanted to be a wood carver," he said, plucking his guitar. "All of a sudden, I wanted to sit and carve wood in front of the ocean, make little animal figures. Wolves, bears, that sort of thing. Give them all to the water. Watch them float on the waves. Or sink. I don't know. Whatever wood does. I wanted to watch it." He said in a sing-song way like a man moaning the blues.

“I never much liked the ocean,” Julia said. She did not like the wind or the salted fishy smell of the sea. She hated the way sand magically made its way everywhere, in her shoes, in her socks, in her teeth. Her mother and father used to go down to Destin once a week every summer without her, and she never fought them about going too, not even once.

“I could take you down to the lake if you’d like. I haven’t been myself in a good few years to be honest. –Could teach you how to fish if you can bait your own hook,” he said.

“What a grandfatherly thing to do,” Julia laughed.

Her grandfather stared silently out the window. The birds had had their fill and were all gone. He played a few awkward notes on his guitar.

“I would love to go,” Julia said, and he picked up the beat as if playing a birthday tune.

The next day Julia woke up to the sound of her grandfather bumping around in the living room as she slept on the sofa with a wolf graphic thrift shop blanket pulled up over her ears.

“Wake up now girl,” he said in a bouncy, raspy voice. “Those fish’ll be wanting breakfast too.” He was digging deep in the living room closet, tossing out coats and shoes in search of his tackle box.

“There she is!” he said when he finally found it, holding it into the air like a medallion.

Together, they loaded up his pickup with poles and foldable chairs. On their way out they stopped by the department store for fishing line, minnows, and nightcrawlers.

Halfway to the lake, they pulled over into a gas station parking lot, and Julia's grandfather brought out s fluffy, golden angel food cake from behind the front seat.

"I just couldn't wait anymore," he said, slicing two finger thick wedges with his pocket knife and slathering both pieces with a dollop of whipped cream. They sat in the car eating, watching as other people waited patiently at their pumps.

"I used to take your daddy fishing all the time," he said. He took a large swallow of the fluffy cake. "Your daddy would throw every single one of his fish back. Couldn't even stand to kill his own food," he said.

"I'm not like that," Julia said swallowing the rest of her cake. Really she did not know if she was like that or not. She had never been out to fish, and there was the slight possibility that she would look into the bulgy eyes of a hooked fish and feel the need to set it free.

As they drove on towards the lake and the rows of houses and shopping complexes were slowly replaced by wooded pines and the occasional cabin. Eventually, they pulled into a dirt parking lot and took out their gear.

"Looks like we're the only one's out," Julia's grandfather said, grinning.

Julia nodded, fumbling with the uncomfortably long pools, making sure no hooks were hanging loose to snag them.

They walked up the dusty path to the lake, but when they got there, there was no lake at all.

Instead there was just a large crater extending for nearly a mile, its dry bottom swirled with muddy sand and trash.

When summer ended, and Julia had to return home, leaving the quiet legend of her grandfather behind, she would tell her parents that they actually had gone fishing that day. She would tell them that the lake had been moss green and thick with bass, that they had skinned their catches barehanded on the pier with the scales flaking off like bits of glitter and that her grandfather had been the kindest, most generous man she had ever known.

The Mirrors

When I was a young boy, I developed a sort of obsession with a girl in my tenth grade class from El Salvador. Her name was Fatima, and she would sit in our algebra class scribbling pictures of Jesus and unborn babies into the margins of our textbook. On Valentine's Day, instead of the typical store-bought cards, she gave everyone a hand drawn picture of a fetus, its embryonic sac shaped like a heart. No one could help but be fascinated by her. For the homecoming dance, she wore a long plain black dress, the kind one would find on a sixty-three year old school teacher when seen from the front. But from the back, the dress revealed a "U" of fabric draped all the way to her hips, and on this space of open back, she'd had painted a blue phoenix, not *tattooed,* but *painted.* Some mystery person had made a canvas of her skin, and she was a wonder to watch, this captivating Salvadorian girl with the blue phoenix shrouding her shoulders and spine.

Fatima would grow up to be a famous artist, and she would die a famous death, shooting herself in the mouth in a way highly uncommon for women. Truly, she was fascinating from start to end, and when I read about her death in the paper, I was not all that surprised. I considered the life of an artist to be more trying in some way, and I knew that her more recent works all involved mirrors. I assumed that looking at bits of one's reflection consistently for hours on end was sure to cause some sort of psychological damage. I could barely stomach my own reflection under certain circumstances. Alone, I could look into my bathroom mirror and be fine. There was nothing much to see. The under-hue of my skin had always been grey as a clam and a childhood of vegetarianism had left me with far less muscle tone than I'd like, but I still considered myself good looking enough. Public restrooms, on the other hand, were a horror. Standing beside another man and looking up from the sink was sure to result in a mental contest for the strongest jaw, the most prominent biceps, the fairest nose. Alone, it's me against myself.

After nearly twenty years, I still had the eerie Valentine's Day card Fatima had drawn. I'd had it laminated and used it as a bookmark. Some would call it a crime against a masterpiece. I called it preservation. If anyone asked me about it, if anyone peeked over my shoulder to enquire about the peculiar fetus themed bookmark, I told them with pride that it was an original, probably worth a good thousand or two, by the Salvadorian artist Fatima Torres. I would let the "r's" roll into the air, trampling their ears. There was power in that name. *Fatima Torres! Fatima Torres!* A revolutionary artist! A revolutionary woman! And I had known her in the prime of her youth. I had breathed the same florescent classroom air as a titan of modern art. We were a part of each other's childhoods. We were the make-up of each other's memories, and I had come to see the

plastic-coated Valentine's Day card as evidence of a girlhood crush, young Fatima etching her affections into the spidery sack of a fetus.

One afternoon, while I was roaming through the internet in search of a recipe for alfredo sauce made with almond milk, I stumbled upon an article stating that Fatima's studio had been opened to the public as a sort of museum. I had to go see it. The studio had rave reviews. It was called "the great cave of her imagination," and it called out to me. As a sensible man of good taste, I was drawn to it, and for fifteen dollars, I was led by a tour guide to a one bedroom top floor apartment full of mirrors, a collection of them leaning against walls and stacked in corners. I was so giddy about being where she had been, placing my feet where she had stepped, but it was an oddly intimate place, and I felt surprisingly voyeuristic.

She had chosen carpet instead of hardwood or tile for her studio, and the carpet was originally white, but overtime it had accumulated the hue of all colors. She had refused to use a drip cloth, and according to the tour guide, who made loud huffing sounds anytime anyone got too close to anything, Fatima was said to have referred to the soiled floor as her "one in the making." The formerly white carpet crunched underfoot where the paint or globs of glue had dried, and I did not see the floor as a work of art at all, but rather a mistake and a complete disregard for cleanliness. I knew for a fact that in school, she had written exclusively on graph paper, each beautifully curved letter occupying its own little grid. The Fatima Torres that I knew would not have tolerated such a mess. She respected vacuums. She was a lady of sanitation.

The mirrors cluttered the studio to the point of it being nearly hazardous. Most of them were painted using a thin mix of acrylic paint and tap water, and each one displayed

a full bodied portrait of some affluent customer who, while looking at the piece, was able to see both their own reflection and the artist's rendition of their form. There were paint brushes everywhere and paint by the gallons. There were more mirrors, a sketchpad, rags whose original colors were impossible to decipher, black and red pencils –the kind used for writing on glass, sponges, a stool, plastic cups, a radio. I slipped one of soiled rags into my pocket while the tour guide was not looking. There were no alarms on anything, just the sense of respect holding everyone back. I was not like the other tourist though. I had known her, and I wanted to remember her as the brilliant disaster she'd become.

In one corner, Fatima had placed an upward turned shoebox spray painted gold. The box served as a sort of shrine with pictures of The Virgin Marry, a candle, and a few flowers spilling out the front. A faded photo of a little girl stood out among the ones of The Virgin. I knew from the internet that Fatima did in fact have a young daughter named Mariela, and I assumed that the picture was of her. The internet said nothing about the father of the child, and I felt cheated not knowing this mystery of her life. The people in charge of the exhibition of her studio had built up a large glass box around the make-shift shrine, and I was not sure if they were trying to prevent people from stealing or worshiping. I took a quick bow in front of the tiny memorial as if I'd walked in front of a Buddha.

Indeed, the room was very Zen-like, and I felt as though I were in a sort of trance. There was only one window, and this too was painted with the acrylic and water mix. It is difficult to imagine the effect that the painted window and all those mirrors had on the lighting of the room. She used a lot of blue in her work even if the portrait did not call for it, and sometimes she painted entire portraits blue, skin and all, to the surprise of the

customer. As a result, the room had a bluish tint if the lights were turned on and the curtains left open. It felt a bit like breathing underwater. You had this feeling of drowning because of all the stuff everywhere, but other than that, it was quite pleasant, even magical.

Naturally, some of the mirrors were broken, but she had positioned the broken mirrors in such a way that the incoming light used them to the effect of prisms drenching everything in luminous rainbow like the sun hitting the shallow end of a pool. Upon touring the room, most people decided that this effect, with the light and the broken mirrors, was the best thing she had ever made, but as I held the fetus bookmark in my pocket, I knew that it was not. There had to be something more, something that I was not seeing.

I walked up to one of the blue portraits of an ancient looking man with a curling mustache spiraling across his face and then to a true-to-life painting of a plump woman with a pet ferret nestled between her breasts. I went from portrait to portrait somehow hoping to find the tenth-grade, blue reflection of myself. I stopped upon a painting that could have been me. It was of a skeletally thin man in a wine tinted blazer. He had the beaked nose of a sorcerer and the frightened, innocent eyes of a raccoon. I looked into the man's painted eyes and saw my eyes. I looked into the man's painted frown and saw my frown. I could feel Fatima's madness radiating from the portrait. What a horror it must have been to look into complete strangers and only see yourself.

Blindness

Annette had been seeing John for two years before she noticed the impossibility of their future together, and even then, it had taken the death of his wife, Redan, for her to realize it. All along, there had been the muted signs of imperfection like a small scar on the side of one's chin. John was married. He had a child, a little girl, named Laurel. He had a way of talking about the child and the wife as if they were disposable, addictions of the past, ticks stuck to his leg, and for two years, he had made promises to leave them. Annette had tried to imagine it: John driving her silver Toyota as they were pulled towards anywhere with saltwater and lobster tails buy one, get one free, the little girl and wife at home, as she and John lay drunk and naked in the sand.

Annette found if fascinating how passion could blind someone. John would come over to her apartment after his managerial job at a start-up tech company that sold

computer software to local spas and salons. He would rant about the bitchy women and gay men who complained about the software's lagging, and she would listen as mesmerized as if he had broken out in song. *This is the tradeoff*, she had thought. She listened to him rant, and he did not judge her for placing a piece of chicken right onto the microwave bottom sans plate or napkin barrier. *Was there any greater sign of affection?*, she thought as she nodded her head in sympathy at his contempt for the entire customer service industry, and he failed to question her for eating three cold, raw flour tortillas right from the pack that she always managed to open on the wrong side even when it came with an easy-tare or zip-lock attachment. Indeed, there was something about John. A sort of something that Annette could only refer to as the nurture factor. The way he would grab a towel for her after they'd step out of the shower and loop it over her head and shoulders as though she were a child. The feeling of being cared for. That was what made her want him.

After all, Annette did not remember the day she woke up to see that all the beautiful girls were getting younger and thinner, and she was no longer invited to go out on midnight escapades to nowhere. At twenty-seven, she had become an adult, a tight-lipped receptionist at a hotel who stayed home on weekends fixing burnt popcorn in the microwave and reading mystery novels like issues of *Cosmo*. She had become so good at FreeOnlineTetris that all of the arrow keys on her laptop were broken, and there was a sort of sad helplessness about her life, about her very being that she was sure John had found endearing, like a puppy with a broken leg or a forty year old whose smile reveals a set of metallic braces.

Annette tried to imagine herself and John really taking off together, but there were always gaps in her attempts to construct their alternative future. She knew that if they really did it, if they eloped like rebellious teenagers, John would love her for a weekend, maybe two. Then, he'd return to his wife and child, wondering if the milk in the fridge had gone bad while he was gone. Annette knew from her mysteries that the mistress never came out the victor. But now, John's wife was dead, and there was this great cloud of possibility that loomed in the air above them.

John's wife, Redan, had been a very high strung woman. The sinewy muscles in her neck seemed to bulge out a bit in pictures. Sudden cardiac arrest and Redan died eating a blueberry bagel at a coffee shop that only the town's high school kids went to, at a coffee shop where all of the staff were technically CPR certified the way most staff of food service jobs are, but no one really knew what they were doing. There was probably a cell phone camera video somewhere of her death, as children were going downhill in that way. Annette was CPR certified. She knew the thirty chest compressions to five breaths ratio necessary to force someone alive. She once had to give CPR to a passed out business man in the lobby of her hotel. She had even sung the Ah-Ah-Ah-Ah-Stayin'-Alive, Stayin-Alive Bee Gees song aloud to make sure she got the pumping rhythm right. The other hotel staff had called Annette an "angel," a "life saver," surprised by her ability to "take initiative in a time of crisis." She wondered if she would have jumped up and saved Redan had she been there watching her body fall to the floor.

Because she did not actually know Redan, Annette considered the affair to be not as bad as it could have been. Annette had only seen Redan in pictures. She had tip-toed naked through Redan's house. She had run a judgmental finger along Redan's spotless

marble countertops, and had seen an especially maternal picture framed in John's office of he and Redan holding their little girl Laurel's hand on her first day of pre-school, Laurel's jack-o-lantern like smile with black gaps where teeth should be. If Annette chose to stare at Redan's pictures long enough she could not help but think that something about Redan reminded her of herself. They were both small with dark features, eyebrows so perfect one would think they were penciled in. They were the type of women who experienced the phenomenon of being slightly lifted while embraced, and they had the same clothing style or lack thereof.

"An inability to wear more than once piece of jewelry at a time," John had told her flicking the thin sliver anklet she wore with his toes as they lay lazily in bed. Annette hated the comparison. She had placed a hand over John's mouth.

"You're ruining everything," She had said, and John spit into the hand she had cupped over his lips. Annette had thought it as romantic as a kiss on the wrist. She pulled her hand back feigning disgust.

On the day of Redan's funeral, John called Annette asking if she could come over to do Laurel's hair.

"You want her to look good for the pictures," Annette said trying to lighten John up. In a way, Annette considered herself lucky in that no one important to her had ever died. She had been to the funerals of grandparents she barely knew, and had cried only because of the domino effect of watching her parents burst into tears.

"God, Annette! There are no pictures at funerals!" John yelled into the receiver. Annette had never heard his voice get so loud and wondered for a second if the phone

had somehow amplified it. She had always imagined his voice box with a little dial, a loudness peak, that there was maybe a deep growl somewhere in there, but nothing else.

"I've seen plenty pictures of funerals," she said, "They're usually the best pictures. Very artsy. I would have pictures at my funeral."

John did not respond.

"I can see you tonight, if you want. I'm sorry," Annette hung up shaking. She wished she had the talent of being able to say the right thing at the right time, but it was a skill she did not have. Even as a hotel receptionist, she was always wishing people a good morning at three in the afternoon. She was afraid to see John before the funeral. Death could make people a little crazy, and she was afraid that he would latch onto her, force her to go with him. Above all else, she could not go to his wife's funeral. She could not stomach the thought of standing in the back of the church a row or two respectfully behind Laurel and John, floating among the dim oak pews undoubtable being cursed by Redan's ghost.

Annette grabbed an orange from the red netted sack on her kitchen counter and began to peel it. She peeled all of the oranges one after another without eating them, until the undersides of her nails burned. She imagined herself combing Laurel's hair into silky pigtails. She imagined placing all of the white veined oranges into little plastic sacks for a child's lunch and felt a rush of anxiety fill her up like a balloon. She would do anything for John. She would chop through bushes in the Amazon if he ever needed her to find him, but she would not go to that funeral. She would not go near him until Redan lay burrowed under soil away from them forever. She looked out of her living room window where it had begun to rain like an omen. She traced the raindrops on the glass with the

tips of her fingers, the anxiety rising higher and higher like a nameless storm inside of her. *I am on the edge of being happy,* she told herself. *I am on the edge of being happy, happy, happy.*

When the funeral was over, John called Annette sobbing and asked her to come over and take Redan's place in their bed. She had seen men cry late at night shrouded in the high leather chairs of her hotel's lobby. Perhaps their big business deals were falling through. Perhaps they were getting divorced. Either way, she had always found something innately heartbreaking about hearing a man cry. It was like watching a polar bear drown or an ice skater fall while spiraling out of their final spin. Annette listened as John's breaths came out in coughs.

"You should drink a glass of water, dear," she said, "or some vodka."

"Tell me you're coming," John said, and Annette knew that it was not normal for a man to ask his other woman to sleep with him after his wife's funeral, but she wondered if John had ever slept alone in the past seven years that he and Redan were together. She wondered if he knew that for the past year or so, she'd begun stacking pillows in her own bed at night where she'd wanted his body to be. Even if he had not asked her, she would have come. Guilt could not stop her. She'd earn herself a one way ticket to hell as long as she got to be with him. She'd sign her name on the reservation list.

"I'll be over when the rain lets up," she said.

"The door will be unlocked."

Annette arrived at John's house around two in the morning, when all of the guests had gone and the lemon pound cakes and hams of mourning had been wrapped and put in the fridge. The front door had been left unlocked as John had promised, and she snuck up

to the bedroom where John was lying in bed with his hands folded over his chest and his eyes open and fixed on the ceiling. His receding hairline was illuminated by the glow of the bedside lamp, and he looked older and phantom limbed, like he should have been the one six feet under in a coffin. For a second, Annette's heart quickened as she wondered if John had decided to kill himself out of grief. Annette felt that such was a real worry with some people, especially people like John whom she admired as poetic for his habit of describing happiness as a cloud or a rainbow, something that exists but cannot really be touched.

She slipped off her clothes and dug underneath the wine-tinted covers beside him. He did not look up at her. He did not say hello. His eyes were wide open, the whites of his baby blues had gone red-pink. He smelled of seawater, not vodka, and Annette thought of them together lounging by the ocean. There sound of ruffling of bed sheets filled the room as Annette squirmed closer to him.

"You smell like the ocean," she whispered into the side of his shoulder. His shoulders were tufted with dark brown hair. Annette had never noticed this before and breathed in the scent of his skin.

"Are you simply breathing in and out and calling that a life?" John said.

"What?"

"Are you simply breathing in and out and calling that a life? What are you doing? What are we doing!" he said bringing a hand to his glowing forehead.

Annette ran her finger along the tufts of John's arm hair. She inhaled and exhaled, breathed in and out like a pro. She imagined herself behind the front desk of her hotel. *Hello, this is the Ridgecrest hotel where we offer our golden standard of luxury service.*

Would you like to make a reservation? Annette felt alone. Terribly alone. The loneliness was swallowing her up like a minnow to a bass.

"I'm trying to comfort you in your time of crisis," she whispered just loud enough for him to hear. John shot up like Frankenstein come to life then plopped back down onto the bed.

"What am I supposed to tell Laurel?" he cough-cried at the ceiling.

Annette was the type of woman who could not tell if her desire for motherhood out-weighed her fear of stretchmarks. She knew that Laurel was about five years old, and she guessed that the child was somewhere in the house, sleeping alone on the night of her mother's funeral.

"Tell me about her," Annette said. She and John were facing each other now on the bed, their faces inches away. Annette wondered if her breath still smelled like cinnamon toothpaste. She wondered if the smell of the oranges had seeped into her skin and clothes.

"Laurel or…" John asked.

"Whichever one you want," Annette said.

"I don't know. She's a kid. She's in kindergarten. Likes Barbies. Hates broccoli. I can't raise a daughter." He said as if Laurel had just suddenly burst into existence with the absence of Redan, as if he had just realized that he was something as humanly mundane as a parent, or worse, something as statistically horrifying as a single dad: a man with a little girl.

"I could stay over for a few days. You could tell her I'm a nanny to help her get used to her mom being gone," Annette said.

"Don't talk about her like that. I've lost the love of my life, you know?" said John. His words chilled the air between them, practically gave Annette's nose frostbite. Could he possibly love her and Redan at the same time? Annette did not know. Was it possible to break off pieces of one's heart like a brick of raspberry filled chocolate and hand it out to different people while smiling? Where did Laurel even fit into any of this? Annette had heard people say that having a child was something like being okay with having your heart walk around outside of your body. She imagined this in cartoon form, the heart popping out in its traditional Valentine's Day shape and flexing the muscles on its thick cartoon arms before going out the door for a stroll. That's Laurel, Annette thought. Maybe John would never be able to love her at all. Even with Redan gone, there was still the little girl.

Annette turned away from him and pressed her face towards the nook where the cool white plaster of the wall met the warmth of the mattress and asked John to unhook her bra. He ran his hand along her back without unfastening the stripe of black lace. Up until then, Annette had been hopeful about their relationship. Together, they had built up the foundations of a future without considering that such a future would ever have the opportunity to come true. It was as if they had imagined a dream house, a lifetime of travel and they had suddenly won the lottery but become paralyzed by the fear of change. Redan's death was the ready-to-go signature on their plans, and yet everything with John was crumbling. Annette and John lay together, feeling each other not sleeping.

Annette would not give up. She imagined a lifetime of burnt popcorn and mystery novels stretching endlessly before her. She imagined the business men sobbing in their suits and leather chairs. She did not want any of it. She wanted to wake up and

stay awake or go to sleep and stay asleep. One or the other, as long as John was there. She would have to win him back through Laurel, his little heart probably running around on light-up sneakers.

In the morning, Annette met Laurel for the first time. Most of Annette's friends already had children, and so she knew how to make a child fall in love with her. She regularly attended the birthday parties of her friends' children, wielding gifts that no mother would technically buy, forgetting the AAA batteries to a remote control car, presenting a beaded friendship bracelet kit to a little girl under five. Annette took a washable marker and drew a small red heart on the top of her own hand, as she and Laurel sat on stools pulled up to the kitchen counter's overhang bar. They waited patiently as John tried to make French toast from scratch without falling over, or running out of the house, or crying more about the loss of Redan.

"Lick the top of your hand." Annette said to Laurel.

Laurel only looked at her, confused by this new woman sitting in her mother's chair. Annette wondered if Laurel also thought she looked a little like Redan.

Laurel licked the top of her hand. She looked like a small cat. The tiny fist. The tiny tongue. The tufts of messy brown hair like her dad's.

Annette grabbed Laurel's hand, pressed it hard against where she had drawn the heart, and let go.

"See! We're best friends now!" She said, watching Laurel's eyes get big and happy as she turned her tiny hand in wonder at the makeshift-love stamp. John was looking their way now, letting the French toast burn. Annette saw the first real glimmers of him falling in love with her again.

After their burnt breakfast, Annette offered to take Laurel to the playground in the hopes that John would sleep off the first stages of depression. She let Laurel stay in pajamas, but zipped a winter coat over her in case she got cold.

John pointed out the front window.

"There's a path leading from there to the playground. There are step stones in the woods. She hates the way the forest chirps. The crickets or cicadas or freaking flying frogs for all I care. She pinches her earlobes, but never muffs her ears. She's weird, just like you," he said and gave Annette a pat on the shoulder as if they were old pals, not lovers.

Annette thought about giving him a kiss on the cheek, but reconsidered. She held Laurel's hand with the friendship stamp and walked out the door. When they came to the forest, Laurel did not let go of Annette's hand to pinch her earlobes, and this made Annette happy because perhaps they really had become friends. She tried to imagine Laurel calling her "Mommy," and she instantly felt old and slightly distraught at potentially being thrown into the playing field of life with such a minor position as stepmother. Annette sat on the bench as she'd seen the real mom's do on TV whenever they took their kids out to the playground. It was early in the morning, and the playground was empty. She watched Laurel run through the plastic tunnels, and struggle with the monkey bars.

"Swing your legs like this!" she yelled from her place next to the bench and began pelvic thrusting the air like a skier about to take off. "That's it! That's it!" She yelled, clapping her hands from the sidelines, as Laurel slowly made her way across the bars.

She wished that John were there to see them, it felt like an inspirational children's movie moment, like a T-ball player in a wheelchair reaching home base.

One hand, then the other. One hand, then the other. On the final bar, Laurel's hand slipped. *The little kitten hand. The little friendship hand*, Annette thought watching it all through a horrified fugue, as Laurel fell face first into the metal landing step of the money bars breaking her nose and dislodging teeth. Laurel screamed and Annette rushed to her, ripped off the winter coat, and pressed it tightly against Laurel's nose and lip in the hopes that it would sop up the sticky red blood. The little girl screamed louder. *Initiative in a time of crisis,* Annette thought, her own eyes beginning to well as if punched. She had invested minutes, hours, a mourning with John's child and had seen her as nothing more than a gate to her future, as a means towards another, better life. She felt blood soaking though the shoulder of her sweater. She felt the mucus of Laurel's broken nose warm her skin and only then did the little girl become real, a living, bleeding thing that deserved everything Annette was not.

"Oh god!" Annette said, carrying Laurel back through the forest as her screaming caused the insects to chirp louder. "Don't be afraid," Annette said to both Laurel and herself. "Don't be afraid," she repeated.

Annette flung open the door to John's house, and a tsunami of loneliness washed over her.

"What the shit!" John screamed, but Annette was no longer there. She imagined herself kneeling on the edge of their perfect beach with her back facing the ocean, and she felt John's anger rising like the white crests of waves from somewhere so far away that it may as well have been from the edge of the universe. He was gone away from her,

distant and imperfect. He put cups face up in the drying rack. He never learned to fold underwear properly. They were selfish and insensitive and would be terrible terrible parents. He would have left her, the bleeding, fragile little girl. He would have left her, the small, dark-haired wife. It was amazing, Annette thought, the clouds of happiness that you could fluff up around yourself, the clouds that could make you fall in love with someone, that could blind you from seeing anything at all.

A Violent Person

I was in the car with my mother. Her hands were placed solidly at ten-and-two and her knuckles were white with a fear she had never overcome of the highway. Her face too was white from the sheer ferocity of it all. She had pointed a gun at my father and left. She had threatened to kill him, to kill all of us, if he so much as sneezed in her direction. It was as if the demure kitten she had known herself to be had suddenly grown up into a barbarous tiger. My mother, I thought. My mother, my mother, my mother. I repeated it in my head until my mind was just a clock ticking with the thought of her in the driver's seat beside me. My mother with her country braids hanging down her shoulders like a school girl's. My mother with the thin satin straps of her pink nightgown clinging to her collarbone with sweat. My mother, I thought. My mother, my mother, my

mother had finally left him. I had dreamed about this moment, thought I would cheer like a fan during a home team victory, but instead I was silent.

I had my window rolled down, the air batting my face like a pair of wings. All the grey pastels of dawn were mixing into each other. I should have been afraid. Surely, my father would come after us. We were on our way to nowhere. The radio was on and playing a podcast about what it meant to be funny, or specifically, the difference between good stand-up comedy and trash. I closed my eyes and imagined the man on the radio speaking. He was bug-eyed with thick glasses and a mustache bushy as a squirrel's tail. The world would go on without us. These were the facts. I would not go to school tomorrow or the next day, or the next. My mother pulled over to the side of the road. She turned off the radio, the headlights, the engine.

"Overtime, you'd think they'd found ways to break us," she said. "Break us good, as if we were horses or wild things needing to be broken."

I kept my eyes out the window. I did not know what she meant by "they." "They" as in my father, or "they" as in the entire race of men in general. I watched the sunrise. I watched the highway slowly fill back up with cars, the business men and women artfully sipping their thermoses of coffee with one hand on the steering wheel.

Three cars pulled alongside us as we stalled on the shoulder of the highway. They rolled down their windows and asked us if we needed any help. A tank of gas? A jump start? I could only feel my heart jumping like a toad in my chest. I kept waiting for my father's white pickup to appear in our rearview.

My mother's real name was Bambi. Bambi like the deer. She had told me stories about how, when she was a child, she would walk past the deer that congregated in her

back yard, and the big does and white speckled fawns would look up at her, without pausing in their circular chew, as if to say, *You. You will not hurt us.*

Bambi, Bambi, Bambi my father would yell like he was putting out a curse, hammering each syllable into her bones with his fist. I had watched it for fifteen years. I had run away four times. I had packed my book bag with clothes, gotten on the bus, and spent all day wandering the aisles of the Wal-Mart nearby until security called home.

We sat silently in the car, watching the morning fan out above the asphalt. I had never seen my mother so calm. We waited, and waited, and when my father did not come, we bought plane tickets to Los Angeles because my mother had never been. We sat in the chrome and faux leather airport chairs, waiting for our pictures to appear on the television above us. Perhaps my mother would be labeled as missing. Perhaps I would be labeled as kidnapped. Every few minutes, my mother would turn to me and place her hand around my thigh right above the knee.

"I am not a violent person," she whispered, her voice choking up like a cough.

"You are not a violent person," I repeated.

In L.A. we cut our hair in the bathroom of a motel. At night, my mother and I slept side by side on the motel's sagging full mattress, and I would lie awake fishing for redeeming memories of my father. He could play the harmonica. He had a good face with deep eyes and a dimpled chin. He had a childhood dark as anyone else. I wanted to feel sorry for him, but the feeling was not there. Late at night when I was still awake, I imagined the metallic wheeze of my father's harmonica creeping up the air vents. I imagined his ghost stalking into the shadowy room, choking both of us, and calling us cunts. That was something he would do. I could see it happening. If we were caught and

he somehow demanded the right to see me, I would tell the judge that he had been the type of person to do such a thing. He was a violent person. There was nothing else that my mother could have done.

I finished the rest of my growing up in L.A., haunted by thoughts of my father. My mother, on the other hand, thrives. She got a job at a restaurant that sold only juice. Juice made of acai, and flaxseeds, and spinach. Juice served in large bowls and eaten sit-down style with spoons. She'd stayed remarkably thin as she got older, and she'd gotten her silver flaked hair cut into a short pixie to accentuate the severity of her face. People at the restaurant found her southern drawl charming and out of place. I took classes at a community college nearby, and after class I would come into the restaurant to visit her. She would hand me a bowl of black raspberries and pineapple chunks saved from the big juicer in the kitchen. I would sit in one of the restaurant's basket weave chairs and tell her about my day. My mother was worried about me. Over time, and what seemed to me to be in a natural way, I'd developed a slight yet noticeable fear of men.

"There's no need for you to be so ruffled," she said, folding her delicate arms along the counter and glancing behind me towards a man in a tank top and biker shorts spooning a purple pool of juice to his lips.

I knew the man was looking at me, noticing my every stretch and twitch, counting my breaths. I drummed my fingers on the crystal white countertop. I scooped my raspberries and pineapples into neat pyramids and flattened them all with my spoon. Whenever I became aware of the sensation of men noticing me, I would hear the raspy drone of my father's harmonica. All through the sunlit and smoggy streets of LA, I would hear the harmonica. I did not tell my mother this. I did not tell anyone.

If I was not in class or at the restaurant visiting my mother, I stayed in bed. I slept and slept as if comatose. When my mother came home, she would lie in bed beside me, placing a cupped hand on my head, lightly mussing the spidery strands of my hair.

"I've done you wrong," she said late one afternoon, her hand reaching up from the mattress to twirl the tin plastic wand opening the window blinds, flooding the small bedroom dark-light, dark-light.

"You've not," I said with my eyes closed tight. The harmonica's whirl was going full speed in a way it had never done before. My head ached like a hot press being forced into my skull, like a bullet to the brain. I turned to my mother, our noses nearly touching. Her face timeworn yet dignified in the shadowy light, her short new hair slicked to her scalp like a mannequin. This was the face that had been stricken and bruised, the internal tumbling of her broken like a domesticated animal, and yet she was okay, healed as if she'd suffered no more than a paper cut. My mother, I thought. My mother, my mother had finally left him while the notes of my father's harmonica still whirled deep inside my head.

Gold

During my sophomore year of college, I would take a class in social psychology in which my professor projected a large line graph depicting spousal love and its relation to the number of children a couple had. Needless to say, the graph had the overall look of an incredibly steep mountain, its peek being at zero and declining significantly with each additional child. By four children, there was almost no love at all. By seven, affection was unheard of. “Why do you think this is so?” our professor asked. She was a gray haired, cynical woman who loved to bring up the very personal details of her own divorce during lecture. The women in the class all shot up their hands as if waving to a cruise ship off shore. The men in the class, myself included, slumped into our plastic chairs and watched. We were a generation hesitant about the production of children. With the headcount of foreign lands such as India and China reaching deep into the billions, we felt a certain moral obligation not to further overpopulate the Earth. What did it matter if

love between two people dissipated with the addition of a third? The normalcy of decline was right there in front of all of our faces. We would all find someone. We would all experience love. We would marry and have children, and our children would eat the love right up.

When I first met my wife, I was at a bar. She had on the shortest dress out of everyone, and when I asked her about it, she said it did not matter because she wore glasses "for modesty." The glasses were small, librarian-like with dark green frames, and I agreed with her. Had it not been for those glasses, she would have looked uncontrollably promiscuous. She had more hair than clothing, and her dark brown waves were a shiny sheet of gel and hairspray. I was going through a phase in which I was almost exclusively attracted to the type of women that would turn my satin glove wearing grandmother over in her grave. I had recently hooked up with a girl who had purple hair and a metallic blue lip ring that quivered whenever she spoke. She wrote gloomy prepubescent style poems, with titles like, "The Darkness" or "Happiness of the Lone Wolf." I was tired of the everyday. I was slowly letting go of the steering wheel of my life, completely content with the idea of careening over a cliff or gliding smoothly into a steel shattering tree.

"Nelson Rivers," I said extending a hand to my future wife as I eased into the amber colored barstool beside her.

"That's a terrible name. One step above the name Cornelius maybe, but a terrible name all the same. Possibly the worst," she said.

I laughed because I did not know what else to do. "It's a family name," I explained. "I'm a third," I added. I knew that women tended to like Jr's and IIIs. Such

titles had the ring of being from a good family, made one seem as though their father owned a castle or at least a golf course. In reality, my father owned a carwash, but none of that mattered because Annazel then proceeded to tell me that that she thought it was extremely selfish for parents to name their children after themselves. Her parents' names were Mike and Sarah Green, and they'd traveled to the Dominican Republic for missionary work before she was born. Her mother, Sarah Green, had gotten multiple stomach ulcers on the trip, and she was named after the old lady, Annazel, who'd nursed her poor mother back to health.

I had shifted into bobblehead mode the whole time. Nodding and smiling. Nodding and smiling. Another saucy brunette had just entered the bar, and had barely made it two steps in before some tall blonde man whose father probably really did own a golf course swept her up. The two stood chatting in front of the rack of old pool sticks. The brunette had on a pair of very dark jeans and a grey v-neck t-shirt. I looked back at Annazel and could see the rigid outline of a belly button ring through her dress.

"So, do you do any *missionary* work yourself?" I asked, hoping that she would at best take interest in my sexual pun and at worst slap me.

Instead, she raised a perfectly trimmed eyebrow, took a sip of her beer, and said, "no."

For four years, I courted Annazel. She was as threatening and beautiful as a lioness in a pet shop, and I would shower her with gifts with the very real fear that she had the very real potential to dismember me limb by limb. We had very passionate, unmistakably violent sex after which my thighs and back and the freckled circumference

of my nipples would be lined with red crescent marks from the bite of her perfectly manicured nails.

After one such love session, we sat at a round, window-lit table at a nearby café for brunch.

"Your pain tolerance is sexy," Annazel said, leaning back in her chair so that the front two legs hovered daringly off the ground.

I stared back at her blankly, holding my coffee cup with both hands. The mug was too thick. I could not tell the temperature. There were small white ovals forming on the coffee's mocha surface as if the cream was beginning to stagnate.

"You're weird," I said.

"You're the one who does not wear underwear," she said back, plopping her chair into its natural position.

I was silent. I had decided that my coffee was indeed cold, and I had added far too much cream.

"I like you so much," Annazel said, reaching across the table to pet my arm as if it were covered with fur.

I could tell that this was her attempt at being affectionate. She looked up at me through her eyelashes like a seductress in a cartoon.

"I love you," I said, and she quickly withdrew her hand as if I'd tried to nip at it. Everything about her was dangerous and addictive, and she was remarkably good in bed.

"You can marry me if you want," She said. She was straight forward and a bit harsh in the reality of her statement. I would not have been surprised if she had demanded

that I get on one knee and seal the deal right there by tying a paper straw wrapper around her finger.

"Okay," I said, and later that week we were married.

Annazel was twenty-four; I was twenty-eight. Almost immediately she became pregnant and made up her mind to name our son Hayley and there was nothing I could do about it. I told her that he would get picked on from day one, that she was bound to get a call every other week from some Principal-something-or-other because Hayley would get pushed down the tunnel slide and land face first in the playground mulch. I told her that he would show up late for Biology class one day, and there would be a substitute teacher and the sub would look up and down the rows of perfectly named children calling, "Hayley Rivers? Hayley Rivers? Has anyone seen *her*?" and the whole class would laugh in his absence. I told her that we would have to buy only blue baby clothes, and even with all the blue, we would say his name and people would think we were some kind of new-age couple doing one of those gender nonspecific experiments. However, every time I tried to protest, Annazel would rise slowly up from the couch, her pregnant belly looming before her, the TV remote poised keenly in her hand like a Molotov cocktail ready for launch.

"Dammit Nelson! I told you! Hayley was my aunt," she yelled before letting the remote fly, the AAA batteries dislodging and thumping dully on the carpet.

"Okay. Okay," I repeated, trying to pacify her, my hands outstretched in peace.

Hayley had been the name of Annazel's late aunt who had died at the age of three in the back seat of a Ford Mustang before Annazel had been born. She had gotten her hands on a bottle of cherry scented car freshener and choked on the small plastic cap right

there on the side of I-40. Annazel's grandfather, John Green, who was a tough old man, a war veteran, undoubtedly cried and screamed like hell trying to give roadside CPR to his only daughter. Now, he probably hated the smell of cherries. Probably hated Mustangs, maybe all cars and scents in general. The boy that would grow up to be Annazel's father had been in the backseat too, a five year old falling asleep on the way home and waking up to both parents squeezing in the back seat pumping away at his little sister's chest.

"It would mean a lot to my dad," Annazel said, and I gave up the fight.

I tried to be an especially good husband to Annazel while she was pregnant. I practically held my breath for nine months waiting for our baby. Most men just sit around and complain about their pregnant wives. They hate running errand after errand to gas stations to get Cheetoes or Sweet&Salty Chex Mix or those disgusting little jalapeño flavored pickles that come in their own vacuumed sealed bags. They hate buying extra-large tubs of crunchy peanut butter and finding those extra-large tubs scraped empty and in the trashcan only three days later, but I did not mind. I looked forward to having a son. I wanted little league games and tacky father's day cards. Annazel and I had been so wild. Before the pregnancy, we had gotten into the habit of mixing coconut vodka with our coffees in the morning, and I knew that Annazel still kept her opague blue, vodka filled water bottle tucked safely under the passenger's seat of her car.

"I had three gulps," she said to me in bed one night, her hand trembling over her swollen belly.

"I'm going to be a terrible mother. I'm going to be an alcoholic, you're going to leave me, and Hayley will like you the best," she said.

"No one can really be considered an alcoholic when they're in their 20s," I said. I had my own fears of parenthood as well, but I thought it best to keep quiet. I began rubbing Annazel's back in small circles and pressing my thumb into the knotted bones of her spine. I pushed my face into her long wavy hair and inhaled.

"You will be the greatest mother," I said, and it felt so true that I wished our child could have been born that night.

Towards the end of month eight and a half, Annazel's water broke right in the middle of the newborn section of Babies"R"Us, and she saw the whole ordeal as a once in a lifetime opportunity to shoplift as many baby blue onesies as possible right before I rushed her to the hospital as the distracted store staff hurried to clean up the mess on aisle four. When we first entered the hospital I felt a sharp rush of anxiety pierce my stomach like a knife. Something is going to go wrong, I remember thinking, and I had the strongest urge to run out of the hospital and drown myself in Annazel's hidden stash of vodka. I watched the alien-like birth, our baby blue and cone-headed, the twist of the umbilical cord hanging like a sausage. Wait for it, I thought, and within a few hours, our doctor returned, her kind yet serious face revealing a slight frown.

"What is it?" Annazel asked loudly, almost historically.

"It appears that your child has peripheral neuropathy," she said. "The nerves in his skin are hypersensitive. Especially in his legs and feet. Pants, socks, shoes, heavy bed sheets will all cause him a lot of pain and discomfort. You feel your shoes on your feet when you first put them on, but then you forget about them. He will be aware all day. He will probably feel like they are crushing him."

I thought it was insane.

"How do you know?" I asked, "How can you tell? No baby likes wearing socks!" I wanted to send the doctor out and have her try again. I wanted her to say "Never mind, your baby's perfect," but we knew something was wrong. He would cry that dry, raspy cry, his little face scrunched like a blistering red bell pepper at a summer barbecue, his arms and feet outstretched and flailing around helpless as an upturned bug. I looked down at Annazel as we both stared at little Hayley through the hospital glass. It was her first time up and walking about since the delivery. She had her arms crossed in front of her chest and her forehead pressed into the glass with her eyes pinched shut. She let out a shuddering exhale that sounded as if someone had taken a jackhammer to her lungs.

"We will be good parent," I said, placing my arm around her shoulder in an attempt to pull her towards me.

She took a step back and looked straight up at me as if there was absolutely no question about it.

"Of course," she said, as if she was not the one who had named a little boy Hayley, as if she did not still have the water-bottle full of vodka under the passenger's seat of her car, as if she did not just steal thirty-five dollars and ninety-nine cents worth of blue onesies from Babies"R"Us.

I was afraid for us, but for a while we were making it. When Hayley was four years old, the only clothes we could put on him were swim trunks and superhero capes. I would go to the supermarket with Batman barefoot in the shopping cart. It would be the dead of winter, and everyone would look at me as if they were about to call social services at any second.

"Arnn't you cold?" the ladies at the cash register would ask Hayley, as if they actually expected a four year old in a Batman cape to say anything other than "I'm batman!"

"He has peripheral neuropathy," I would explain, and the store clerks would smile pityingly at both of us, having no idea what peripheral neuropathy meant other than that it somehow made it okay for a child to go around nearly naked in December.

I had heard people say, especially for young men, that if your life became too fast paced, if you were too giddy with freedom, having children would slow you down and even you out into someone respectable. From the moment Hayley was born, I felt the changes in Annazel and I. Almost immediately, Annazel had cut her hair. She started attending weekly "Parents for Disabled Children" meetings and had thoroughly read and reread everything peripheral neuropathy related that Google had to offer. I had relearned how to tell old nursery rhymes like the Three Little Bares and The Billy Goat's Gruff by heart. We had begun the stow evolution from people to parents, and when we went to bed at night exhausted and smelling of applesauce and baby wipes, we barely touched.

The Christmas before Hayley turned five, we decided to go over to my cousin Jake's house. He had just moved back into town and had two kids of his own, a boy and a girl around Hayley's age. Annazel stood at the kitchen counter crushing croutons in a Ziploc bag for the stuffing, as I nursed a thick cup of eggnog heavily laced with spiced rum.

"You should bring the kids over one weekend, and I'll take them to the museum of natural sciences," I said. "They've got a whale skeleton bigger than any dinosaur I've heard of."

Jake nodded at me in amusement. He had rowdy sling-shot wielding kids and the thought of them trailing silently behind a museum tour guide was almost impossible.

"If you can get them buckled and in a car, you can have them," he said.

Suddenly we heard a loud scream, and Annazel and I ran to the kid's bedroom where Jake's boy and girl rushed out to meet us. Hayley sat on the toy and gift-wrap littered carpet wailing. Snot and tears covered his face and drained into his gaping mouth. They had tied the girl's pink and purple sneakers on him, and he sat scratching at the laces as if he were being attacked by an entire colony of fire ants at once. I ran to untie the laces. Hayley had never learned to tie shoes. He did not have to.

Annazel stood in the door way, not entering the room. She looked down at Jake's girl who began sobbing instantly, and then at Jakes boy who just stood there dumb with his hand sin his army cargo pants. You could tell that the boy did not care. He probably thought Hayley deserved it, all of it, for having a girl's name.

"We were just…," Jake's boy began, and Annazel slapped him.

She slapped him the way no sane person would slap a child, and Jake's girl screamed her shrill little girl scream and the whole family rushed into the hallway to find Jake's boy knocked out cold on the floor.

After being kicked out, I called Jake to apologize. I told him that I understood, that Annazel had overreacted without thinking in the blind, overprotective way that any parent could, but he would not hear a word I said. I whisper-yelled at Annazel the entire car ride home as Hayley slept in the fuzziest, most comfortable booster seat money could buy.

"It's hard for both of us," I told her, but she just sat there silently in the passenger's seat looking down at her hands and turning the right one over every once in a while to see if the plam was still red. I could hear the sound of the tires bumping along on the pavement and the whistle of the wind through the sliver of open window. I could tell Annazel knew what she had done. She had hit someone else's child, and something inside of her was being crumpled up like notebook paper. She was folding into herself, into her love of Hayley, away from me.

That night, I stood in the doorway and watched as Annazel took a baby's hair brush and ran the soft white goat's hair bristles all over Hayley's skin as she did every night before he went to bed. The doctor said that it might desensitize him over time, and to Annazel it became more than a routine, it was a ritual, as if Hayley were some porcelain cast idol and she an elderly Catholic woman drawing crucifixes in the air

"I love you more than the entire world caste in gold," she said, kissing both of Hayley's eyelids, as I crept silently to her side in awe of our child who could not, would not, ever wear shoes.

Sky Burials

When I was twenty-four years old, I lived in a two bedroom apartment by myself while the man I thought I would marry lived in a one bedroom studio across town with high beamed ceilings and brick accent walls. Propped up like sick children, we would sit in his big mahogany bed watching videos of other people's weddings. How he got these videos, I do not know, but they were charming and surprisingly well made with little girls in cowboy boots serving the guests Iced Tea and the ending scenes always had the groom blind folded and friends gathered to reveal a vintage car or motorcycle topped with a black satin bow.

"Now, that's a dowry if I ever saw one," I said one evening when a red sheet was drawn back like a matador's cape, and a Carolina blue Firebird appeared underneath.

"I think I'd be worth a little more than that," he said.

He finagled the back of my head into the nook of his armpit. He smelled like cigar smoke and dandruff shampoo.

When I had first met him, that uncertain summer after I'd just received my bachelor's degree in media production and communications without an internship to my name, he suggested I move to Colombia to make cigars.

"People pay big money for cigars rolled on the thighs of Black girls like you," he'd said.

I thought him a rare breed, the type of man who'd sign himself up for a war or anything really, bright eyed and in line to salute.

After the second night I slept over, he bought me a toothbrush –a clear temporary one with no colors on the bristles –and sat it next to his own. In the mornings, we'd shower and he'd dot my toothbrush with toothpaste. He'd stand half toweled in one of his His-and-Hers mirrors, balanced cleanly over the sink, and I'd roam around the bedroom, still brushing, making the entire bed before I had to spit. Whenever I asked him how he felt about me, he'd turn right around and ask if I knew how some people came in pairs.

As for me, I did not know what I wanted. I was envious of people who were able to look back at their life and pick out entire decades during which they were happy. They could say things like, "I had a happy childhood," or "I was never a happy teenager." January fourth two years ago, I was walking under a dogwood tree in my grandfather's front yard and a wind gust shook the branches raining down white petals. I was satisfied by the perfect images of things, by the day-to-day. Once, as a child, I had watched a spider complete a web in its entirety.

We had been together six months when I got my first real job. I was working on adding background music to a short documentary about sky burials in Tibet. That was what I did. I added sound tracks to film. I had watched the documentary over ten times. It was not what I'd thought. I had expected the rural Tibetans, carrying bandage swaddled corpses on their backs, to come to some sacred tree and place the bodies there, way up in the branches. Instead, they took their dead to monasteries where red robed monks would chop the bodies up in giant pits before standing back and letting the vultures go at it. I did not know monks could handle bodies in that way. I did not know vultures were that big.

After watching the documentary, I had a sudden desire to "find myself." I began eating a lot of kale. I began listening to audio recordings of the Quran because I'd heard that it was beautiful, and it was.

I was in the apartment of the man I thought I would marry, sitting on the exercise bike he'd discarded randomly in a corner of the kitchen, my feet peddling in slow circles, the headphones in my ears singing *Bismillāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥī.* In the name of God, The Most Gracious, The Most Merciful. It was all the Arabic I knew, and I had looked it up online. The man I thought I would marry stood at the kitchen sink slicing open a package of frozen salmon. He let the pink fillets tumble into the water to thaw. He turned to face me. I took my headphones out.

"You're a silly kid, you know that?" he said. His arms were folded across his chest. They were brown and surprisingly hairless.

"I'm thinking about traveling, getting out to see things," I said.

"Like a road trip?"

"Like India. Like Taiwan."

He made a long whistling sound like a cartoon character falling from a cliff.

"We're wasting a lot of money paying our own separate rents," he said, and I felt as though we'd entered some sort of game, like everything was being thrown out onto the table at once.

"I only want to be rich enough to afford the nonessentials," I said, "like carrot peelers."

He laughed at me and pulled open a drawer. He had three carrot peelers in all, each one shiny and silver with different color handles distinguishing them. He had liked to cook. I could boil tortellini. I could bake kale chips.

I had begun absentmindedly peddling the exercise bike as if I were trying to win a race, my legs pumping up and down, and the caged metal fan composing the front tire pushing great gusts of air into my face. I was trying to look forward, trying to crack open the crystal ball in the back of my mind, but all I could see were the typical checkpoints of life lighting my way like street lamps on a lone road. He came over and put his hands on the handlebars. He told me to stop pedaling, but I could not.